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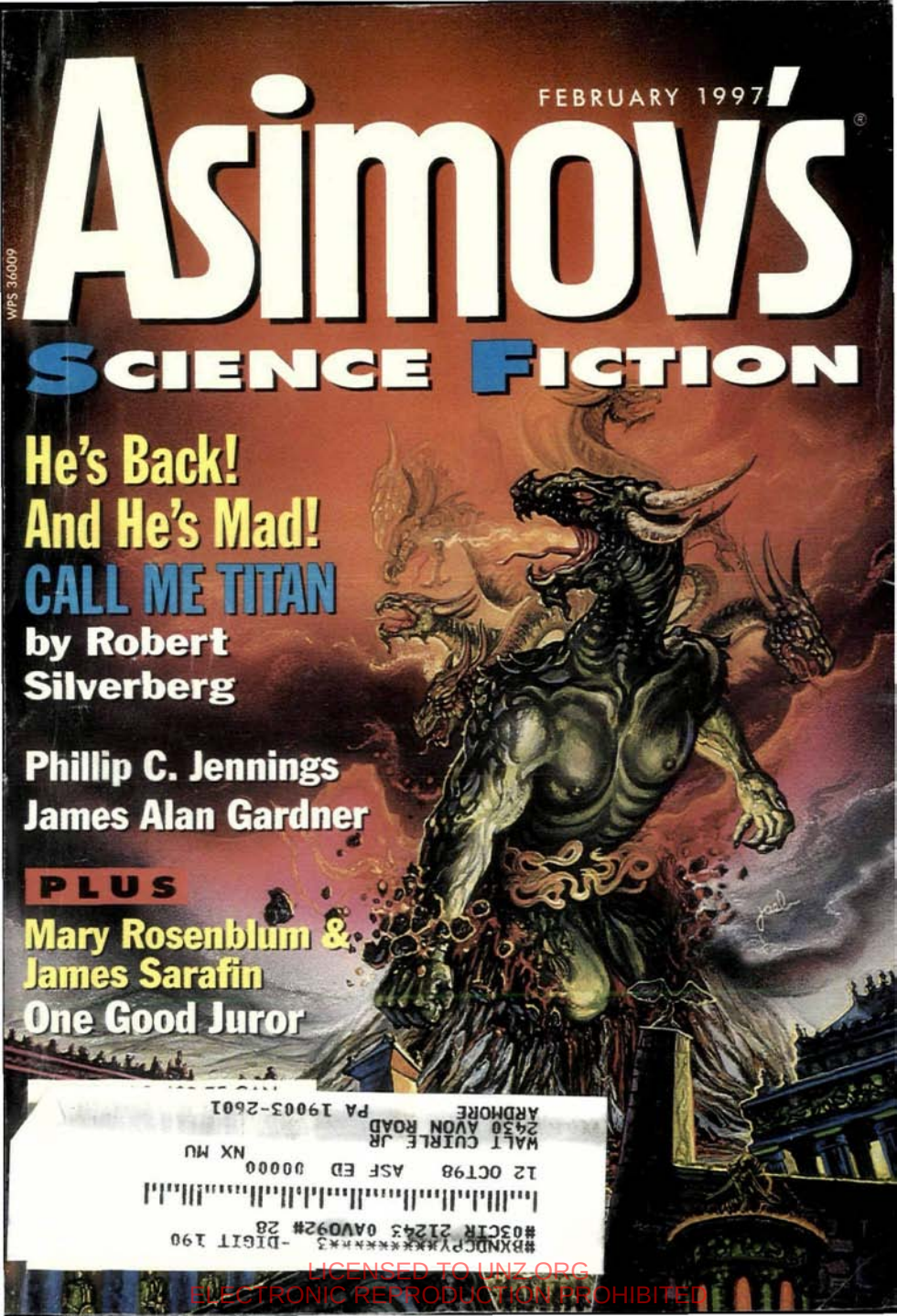

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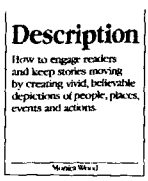
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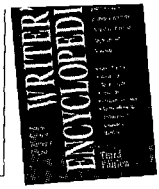

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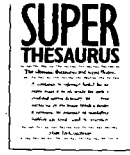

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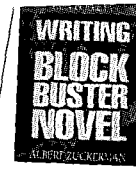

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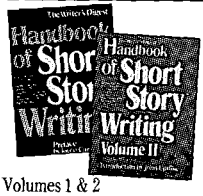

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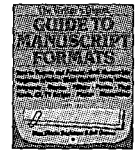

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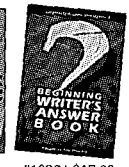

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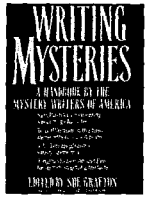

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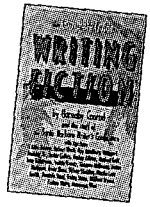

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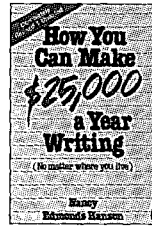

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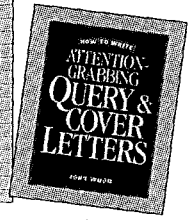

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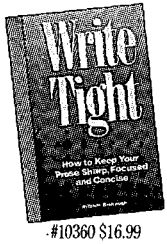

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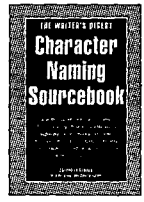

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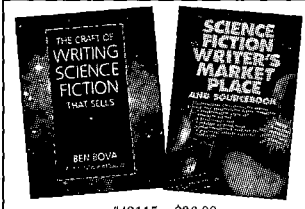

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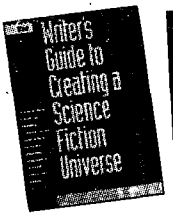

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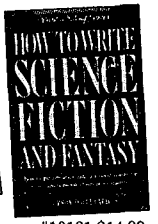

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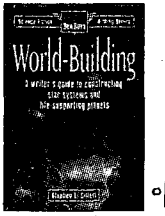

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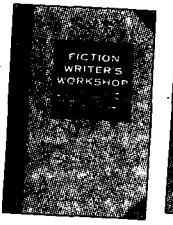

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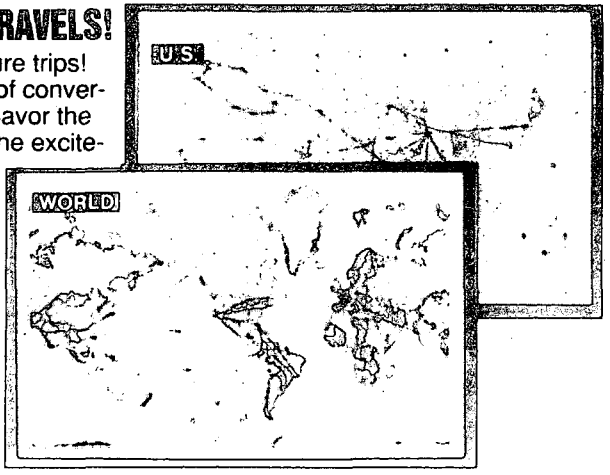

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

MEMORIES OF A CURIOUS CHILDHOOD

I am, like some of you, older than I used to be—old enough to remember when science fiction magazines cost a quarter, and how to change a typewriter ribbon, and what Isaac Asimov looked like before he grew those side-whiskers. I'm old enough, I'm afraid, so that I've outlived most of my childhood schoolteachers, some of my childhood friends, even my college roommate.

But one thing I haven't outlived is my curiosity. Even now, I keep looking ahead, peering around corners, eager to see what's coming next. And it's that quality of restless curiosity, or what remains of it in me, that keeps me (relatively) youthful of spirit. The powerful desire to know what next month will bring, or next year, or next century—to learn *how things are going to turn out*—is a better rejuvenating tonic than Geritol.

Of course, a lot of things that once mattered supremely to me I now don't care about at all. Who wins this year's National League pennant, for example, or even who wins this year's Hugo for Best Science Fiction Novel. Talk to me about baseball next time we're both in 1948, and I'll go on and on about the great new Brooklyn Dodger players like Gil Hodges and Roy Campanella and Duke Snider, and what wonders they'll accomplish next season. But these days the Dodgers play in L.A. and I don't have a clue to who's on first. As for Hugos, well, I still show up at the annual ceremony and I applaud dutifully as my colleagues collect their shiny trophies, and when I win one myself, as happens now and then, I am quite sincerely delighted, but the old summertime fascination of speculating on the probable Labor Day winners no longer seems to be there for me.

It's a natural process, I guess, this ebbing of the curiosity-libido. Most of us past forty can't manage to keep our waistlines where they were twenty years ago, our hair undergoes funny changes of color about the same time, and the mind begins to pull in some of its antennae too, I guess. But I have enough curiosity left in me, even now, to keep myself revved up about things to come.

No matter what time I've gone to sleep the night before, I'm up at six the next morning without benefit of alarm clock, so avid am I to see what the new day will bring. I look forward impatiently to the morning mail, to the day's telephone calls, to the unfolding of my day's writing stint. I find myself wondering where I'll have dinner that night—a Thai restaurant? Ethiopian? Indian?—and what new and unfamiliar things I'll find on the menu.

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It goes beyond that, of course. I want to last long enough to find out what it will feel like to date a letter "January 4, 2001." I want to hang in there until the exploration of space starts up again, so I can hear astronauts describing their jaunts across the sands of Mars. I want to be around when the Chinese finally excavate the gigantic mound that covers the tomb of the Emperor Ch'in Shi Huang Ti. And I have all sorts of travel plans in mind—Australia, Portugal, the Galapagos Islands, the heights of Macchu Picchu, the reconstructed museums of reunited Berlin, a list that goes on and on into my dotage.

It's a healthy thing, curiosity. I've had an acute case of it ever since I was a boy.

What an *annoying* little brat I was! When I was in the first grade I discovered by reading the printed warning on its side that one must not, under any circumstances, take the fire extinguisher down from the corridor wall and turn it upside down. Why not? I wondered. What would happen? So I took it down and turned it over. Foam, of course, came shooting out in wondrous abundance, and teachers came running from all directions. "Well, I wanted to know what would happen," I told them. If they were amused by my precocious inquisitiveness, they kept it well hidden.

Somehow, a year later, I became fascinated by eels—by the idea that certain fishes looked very much like snakes. Snakes interested me. So did snails, and frogs, and just about everything else. A fish that

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looked like a snake was irresistible. So I asked Mr. Brenner, the good-natured man who ran the fish market on the corner, to get a live eel for me. (In those days we knew all the local market proprietors by name, the grocer and the baker and the fish man, and we called them "Mr." this and that, not "Sid" or "José.") I was much more extroverted and outgoing then than I later became, and a lot of people were charmed by the way I went around poking my nose into their business. Mr. Brenner, God only knows why, promised to get me an eel.

And he did. He called me into the store a few days later and handed me a big whonking brown eel in a huge jar, and I carried it home and (since I had no fish tank) put it into the bathtub. We had only one tub to serve the whole family, and turning it into an eel-tank would very quickly have caused some household inconvenience, but I suppose that when you're seven you're better at expressing curiosity than you are at thinking about consequences.

My mother, a third-grade teacher, came home from school a little while later and found a live eel in our bathtub. This was over fifty years ago and I don't quite recall her reaction—but, though she had had plenty of opportunity to watch me in action by this time, it was probably less calm than a simple, straightforward "Robert, why is there an eel in the bathtub?" I do remember that the eel went back to Mr. Brenner very quickly and that there was a lively discussion when my father got home an hour or two later.

I had a microscope, of course. When I heard that the brine from pickle-barrels contained interesting microorganisms, I went across the street to Mr. Cohen's grocery store and asked for some pickle brine. When I explained why I wanted it, he gave me a pickle too. Coming home with the brine caused less fuss than coming home with the eel had created.

I saw the man who ran the laundry—I don't remember *his* name—reading a Chinese newspaper. I asked him for a copy and he gave me one and I spent an hour trying to figure out how to read Chinese. Languages interested me: at eight, I had already learned a few words of Spanish and a bit of French. Got nowhere with Chinese, but it was instructive to see how rich and various one planet's languages could be.

In 1944 someone gave me a subscription to the *National Geographic*—I get it to this day—and instantly I yearned to see with my own eyes all the places in those wondrous photographs, where bizarre creatures dwelled, where alien architecture brightened the landscape. I longed to climb the Pyramids and trek the Gobi and stare up at the redwood trees of California. Coral reefs, rain forests, geysers, volcanoes, Mayan jungle temples, the dunes of the Sahara, the cactus forests of Mexico—so long as it was something qualitatively different from Brooklyn, N.Y., I wanted to see it. It was wartime, then, and nobody went anywhere except with government permission; but I have diligently

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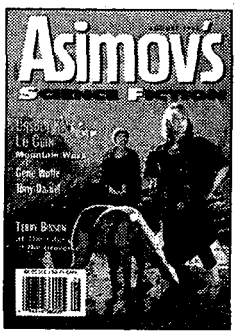

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spent my adult life searching out those myriad places which, back then, I was able to visit only vicariously, via the *National Geographic*.

But the *Geographic* wasn't enough. The same intellectual hunger that led me to turn over fire-extinguishers, bring home eels, peer into microscopes, and ponder the laundryman's incomprehensible newspaper caused me to turn my attention to ever more distant places and eras—other worlds, other epochs. I wanted to make great swooping journeys in space and time. My mind boiled with questions. What were the dinosaurs really like? Would we ever go to Mars, and if we did, what would we find there? And the planets of other stars: were they anything like the ones I saw depicted in *Planet Comics* and the Buck Rogers newspaper strips?

Ah, that was frustrating! I could never hope to go on journeys to the Mesozoic; and as for the glorious ray-gun and spaceship future shown in the comics, I knew even then that I would live to see only a small segment of it, a short way into the twenty-first century at the very best.

But then I stumbled on science fiction. It was a handy substitute for the fulfillment of those impossible curiosities of mine. John Taine's novel *Before the Dawn* was as good an eye-witness account of the dinosaurs as I could hope to have, and H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine* showed me the eons to come in 40,000 astonishing words; and soon I found the SF magazines, too,

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where writers named Heinlein and Asimov and Williamson and van Vogt were depicting the future for me in fictional form with such vividness and clarity that I could almost believe I was there. Such magazines as *Astounding Science Fiction* and *Startling Stories* became the *National Geographic* of this next phase of my intellectual development.

"He had never seen a humanoid," Jack Williamson wrote, in a classic story published in 1947. "Smaller and slimmer than a man. A shining black, its sleek silicone skin had a changing sheen of bronze and metallic blue. Its graceful oval face wore a fixed look of alert and slightly surprised solicitude. Altogether, it was the most beautiful mechanical he had ever seen."

And a door opened for me, and I was in the rhodomagnetic future of "With Folded Hands," and for the next hour my curiosity about what the world of two or three hundred years hence was going to be like was satisfied. I *knew*. I was *there*. Jack Williamson had taken me there. Science fiction, for the moment, had soothed my need to peer into the impossible-to-attain worlds beyond my own probable lifespan.

You understand. You've had the same experience, or you wouldn't be reading this magazine.

That overriding curiosity that never lets up—that hunger to get answers to the most audacious questions—I've always had it, and I have it still, though I don't bring live eels home anymore. You have it too. And, I'm willing to bet, have eel stories of your own to tell. ●

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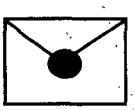

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LETTERS

Greetings:

After more than fifteen years as a faithful subscriber, I am writing my first letter. I was tempted to write after Isaac Asimov's death but was too traumatized by the loss of one of my favorite authors, not only of science fiction and science, but across the literary spectrum.

I simply loved the way this man thought and wrote about everything. In fact, for my birthday today, I received, *Yours, Isaac Asimov*, the collection of letters compiled by his younger brother, and have ordered *Asimov Laughs Again*, the final section of his autobiography. I don't have *all* his books but I have close to a hundred.

I worried for awhile that his magazine might not survive his death. Although there was an obvious and understandable adjustment period, the magazine has recovered. I believe it was essential to continue with a regular editorial and Robert Silverberg has fulfilled that space admirably. I am disappointed that the "Letters" section has not been maintained consistently although I concede I miss Dr. Asimov's concise and often humorous responses.

As I am a voracious reader with eclectic taste, I have no problem with the type of stories you publish as long as they are the best quality possible and this standard has been upheld since the good Doctor's death.

I look forward to the day when some astute publisher offers for sale a collection of Isaac Asimov's editorials from all sources, including this magazine.

I wish everyone involved good health and good fortune as you continue to produce one of Dr. Asimov's lasting memorials. Thank you for many years of excellent reading.

Sincerely,

Ted Jacobsen
Glouster, ON
Canada

Dear Editor,

I've been a subscriber for many years. Enjoy the magazine!

This is my first letter. I'd like to compliment you and artist Wojtek Siudmak on the magnificent cover on the May 1996 issue. This makes me think of a 1990's Virgil Finley. I am very impressed with Mr. Siudmak's work.

Good luck,

Charles G. Baird
Watervliet, NY

Dear Editors,

My praise for "The Age of Aquar-

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ius" by William Barton in the May *Asimov's*. I remember well the effect the Cuban Missile Crisis had on my eleven-year-old view of the world as I watched my parents talk seriously about Nuclear War. A fine "what if" tale that causes one to view history with more interest. More from Mr. Barton would be appreciated.

I have read *Asimov's* since the days of the great label-removing wars '81–'83. I am always impressed at how very good the writing is—this clearly reflects high quality editorial work.
Thank you.

Mitchell Edelstein
Bethesda, MD

Dear Mr. Dozois,

Kudos to all parties concerned for the May '96 issue of *Asimov's!* From cover to cover, it was a delight. In all my years of subscribing to your magazine, I've never before seen an issue where *every* piece was an unqualified joy to read.

Mr. Silverberg's ruminations about "The Dinosaur in the Living Room" made me laugh out loud. Mr. Barton's "Age of Aquarius" scared the socks off me, thinking about what might have been. Bravo to Ms. What for "The Goddess is Alive and Well, Living in New York City," another laugh-riot. "The Dog's Story" by Ms. Arnason was a beautifully crafted visit to a favorite genre. I wish I'd had an uncle like the one portrayed in Mr. Utley's "Silurian Tale."

And finally oh, golly, Mr. McDevitt's "Time Travelers Never Die"—what a page-turner! Well-developed characters and a thoroughly satisfying wild ride through history.

It's a shame four of these will be competing against each other in the Short Story/Novelettes categories when the awards come around, because in my opinion, they are ALL winners. This issue I will keep forever!

Thank you for putting it all together for us.
Sincerely,

Carol Mueller
Austin, TX

Dear Mr. Di Filippo:

Arthur C. Clarke has said and written many memorable things, but in your book review column in the June issue of *Asimov's* you attribute to him, by allusion, what I like to call "Haldane's Suspicion." (There are so many Laws, Theorems, and Conjectures, but this one provides its own unique noun.) It was the British geneticist J.B.S. Haldane who said, "I suspect that the universe is not only stranger than we imagine, but stranger than we *can* imagine." I may, just possibly, be a word or two off from the exact text, but I am certain of its creator.
Sincerely,

Mark A. Mandel
Framingham, MA

Dear Editors and Readers:

I have never written to a magazine before but felt so much wonder at George R. R. Martin's story

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"Blood of the Dragon," in your July issue, that I just had to. I've always loved Martin's stories and this was no exception! He really made the characters come alive for me. Please thank him for his wonderful gift of writing.

I also want to tell you that I love your magazine and am so pleased that it is available in Braille. I've been a reader for quite a few years and will keep on reading as long as the magazine keeps being produced in a format that a blind person can read.

Have a long and happy life, *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine!
Sincerely,

Lisa Warner
Albany, NY

Anyone who wishes to correspond with me, can e-mail me at lwarner@capital.net.

Dear Mr. Silverberg,

As a bit of a language purist myself, I appreciated your August 1996 Reflections on the evolution of our language through strange mutations that survive to reproduce. You used a term in passing that is also in the process of losing its original meaning—"coin" as in "to frame or invent a new word or phrase" {OED}. These days the saying "to coin a phrase," rather than claiming originality, is frequently used to mean "to quote a phrase." Another odd mutation is the misuse of the word "tact" in the expression "taking a new tact." The idea of changing sailing direction by "tacking" has been merged with the notion of changing "tactics" to produce this odd hybrid.

As the mother of a three-year-old dinophile, I loved Mary A. Turzillo's dinosaur poem. Perhaps the four footed furry friends in our house are descendants of Purringsaurolopuss and Prontocountertops.

Elizabeth Coley
From the Internet

Dear Gardner,

Le Guin's "Mountain Ways" in the August 1996 edition was my first encounter with the planet O. Nonetheless, I felt quite at home there, as though the inhabitants' prejudices were mine, and their strange four-way marriage quite normal, after all. What was most interesting about the story, I thought, was the way in which it addressed the issue of forbidden sexual relations. For the existence of such forbidden alliances, Le Guin seemed to say, was a necessity to any human culture. Skirting around them, finding a relationship partly forbidden, and yet not utterly sacrilegious, seemed to be the key here. Following social norms entirely would be the death of these characters. And yet, they must follow them, too. Or else cease to be human. Or part of humanity at large, anyway.

Terry Bisson's "The Edge of the Universe," was as humorous as "The Hole in the Hole." I admit, I was dubious that he could pull it off—yet again. "The Hole in the Hole" was superb, but surely a one-time thing. To push that success to the limit was a sad thing.

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Only here, it wasn't sad at all. Just fun—and with a touching element of truth. Everything does seem to go wrong just when we want to go right. And if reversing entropy could ever be wrong—Bisson shows how here.

I found that the biting humor of Hast's "Earth: Your Toxic Dream Vacation" worked quite well. I felt something was missing, however, in that there were no real characters. The voice of the advertiser, of course, but we never know much about him, except the face he (now why do I assume that it is a he?) puts on here.

Finally, "Counting Cats in Zanzibar" was a variation on an old theme of *Asimov's,* which is surely appropriate for your magazine. It kept me guessing almost until the very end. And then I asked myself, "would a robot be that gullible?" Would he guess more or less easily than a human? But maybe experience is the only teacher there, and that is the one thing a robot of three years could not have.

All in all, an outstanding issue. Thank you.
Sincerely,

Mette Ivie Harrison
Provo, UT

Dear Mr. Silverberg,

My compliments to you and all at *Asimov's* for a very fine magazine, and to you, sir, for years of excellent fact and fiction. I write in response to your Reflections column in the August '96 issue, "Gourmet to Go." My most sincere and heartfelt sympathies to yourself and anyone hoping to communicate effectively, as words become more mangled in their use daily. My first example came as a small child when, hoping to impress my father with my vocabulary, I told him a business idea he'd expressed over dinner would be very "ludicrous." I'd meant "lucrative," and the embarrassment I felt then still fuels my ire over people warping the language into their own applications. While I am aware that English has always been a nightmare to learn, having borrowed from so many other languages and giving us such marvelous synonyms as "flammable" and "inflammable" (and that bastard cousin, "irregardless"), I have known people to simply make up their own words at will. My most memorable comes from working at a defense contractor who operated a test known as "Voltage in Air," which consisted of (you guessed it) hanging an item in the air and applying high voltage. You might expect an aerospace company to be populated with nerds to whom technical jargon is an intimate acquaintance. Not so here, for even the engineers tended to call this test the "voljinaire test"! (Perhaps a side effect of Legionnaire's disease?)

I do not have the best vocabulary, nor do I know my Latin or much of any language other than English; my knowledge is hardly authoritative. But I fervently wish that people would take more deliberate care with the words they use. It disturbs me to think that people,

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above all the other impediments to understanding each other, actively contribute to the problem. Thank you for all your engaging and entertaining columns, and I hope for many more.
Sincerely,

Bob Volk
Syracuse, NY

Knowing something about the derivation of words helps us to use them correctly. You would never have confused "ludicrous" with "lucrative" if your six-year-old self had been aware that the Latin word ludere *means "to play" and* lucrum *means "gain" or "profit." The two most useful subjects I took in high school were Latin and typing.*

—Robert Silverberg

Dear Mr. Silverberg,

I liked your article, "Gourmet to Go." I usually get a chuckle from your articles, and always get something to think about. Thank you, and keep writing.

One reason that I can think of for "penultimate" being misconstrued to be better than "ultimate" is the similarity to the word "pendragon." "Penultimate," as you pointed out, comes from Latin roots, meaning "Almost-Last." "Pendragon," however, comes from Welsh roots, and means "Chief-Leader" or "High-King." The Latin derivation would mean "Almost a Serpent." With the recent rise in popularity of the Arthurian legends, the Welsh meaning has become fairly well known. So, putting the Welsh "pen-" on the Latin "ultimate" gives you "Chief-Last Thing." Which is certainly more impressive sounding than a simple "Last Thing."

On the topic of the misuse and abuse of language, here is a poem that should be pronounced as if it were Latin, but listened to in English.

O Sibili, se ergo,
Fortebus es inero.
O Nobili, demis trux
Si vatsinum, causan dux.

— anonymous (really, it wasn't me!)

Jesse Chisholm
From the Internet

Forty buses in a row, yes. An ancient spoof and still a good one. As for "penultimate." I doubt that Pendragon *has anything to do with it. People just think "penultimate" sounds even more ultimate than "ultimate." But it's derived from a perfectly good Latin word with no Celtic antecedents whatever.*

—Robert Silverberg

CORRECTION:

"The City of God," Gardner Dozois and Michael Swanwick's October/November novella, omitted its credit line: The story was first published on *Omni Online* in December 1995.

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LOVE BITE

Will your mommy get mad if
I give you a little love bite
she giggled as she kissed me
hard on my mouth and my cheeks
my forehead my chin
neck nose
her teeth nipping everywhere
cold and sharp
My mommy's dead I said
marveling at the glow of
her death-pale cheeks
searching for the sparkle of life
missing from her bottomless eyes
knowing that I never would
and that in the end
it wouldn't matter anyway
I know she said
and the giggle became a cackle
then a jungle roar spilled
from her ever-bloodier mouth
and I watched the tiny drops
as their garnet gleam faded
as they dried and died
seeping into the wrinkles of her lips
I love you I said
and laughed because
I didn't really love her
so much as I loved what she was
and I panted as my blood raced
at the thought of what
she would help me become

—Jenna A. Felice

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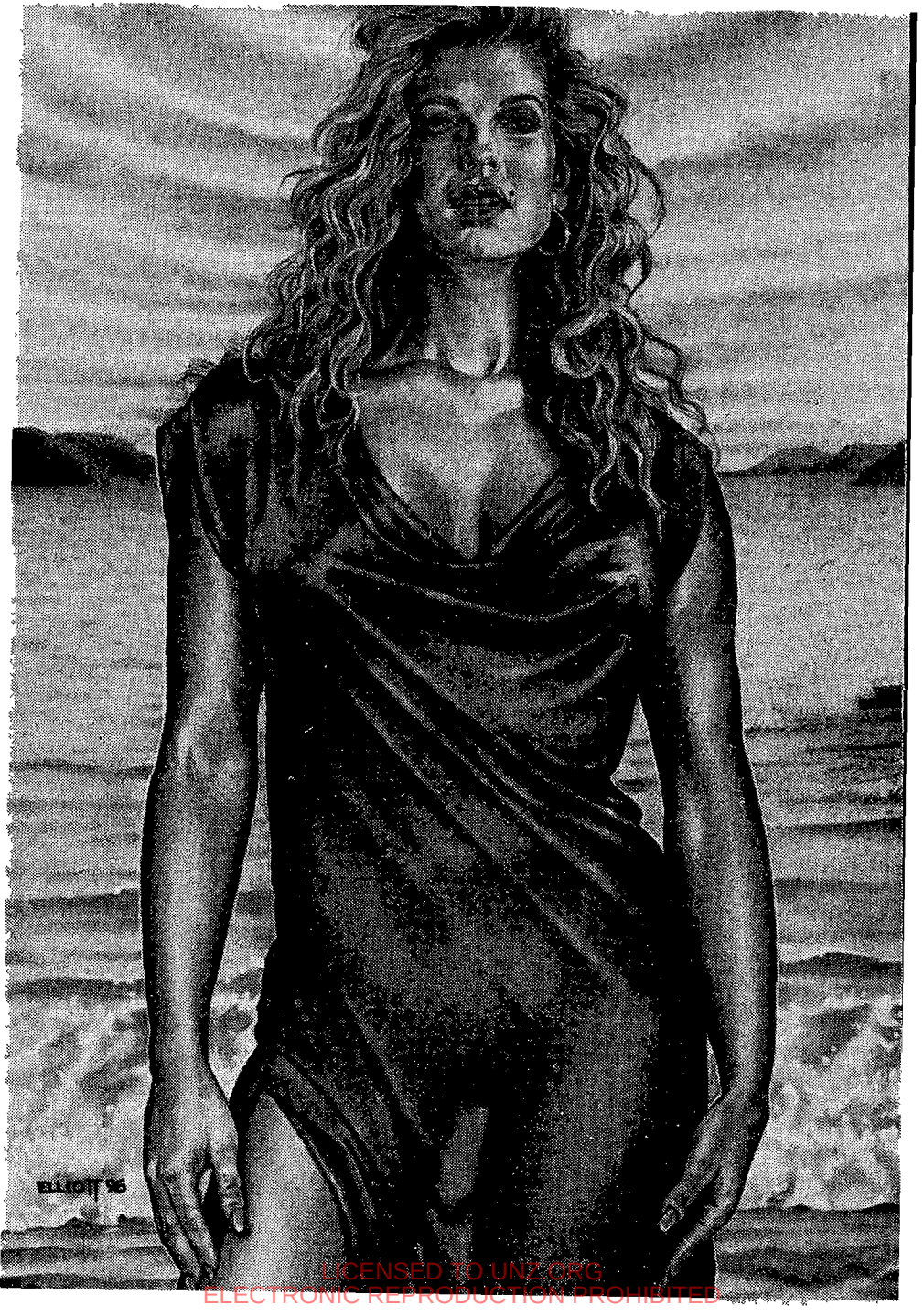

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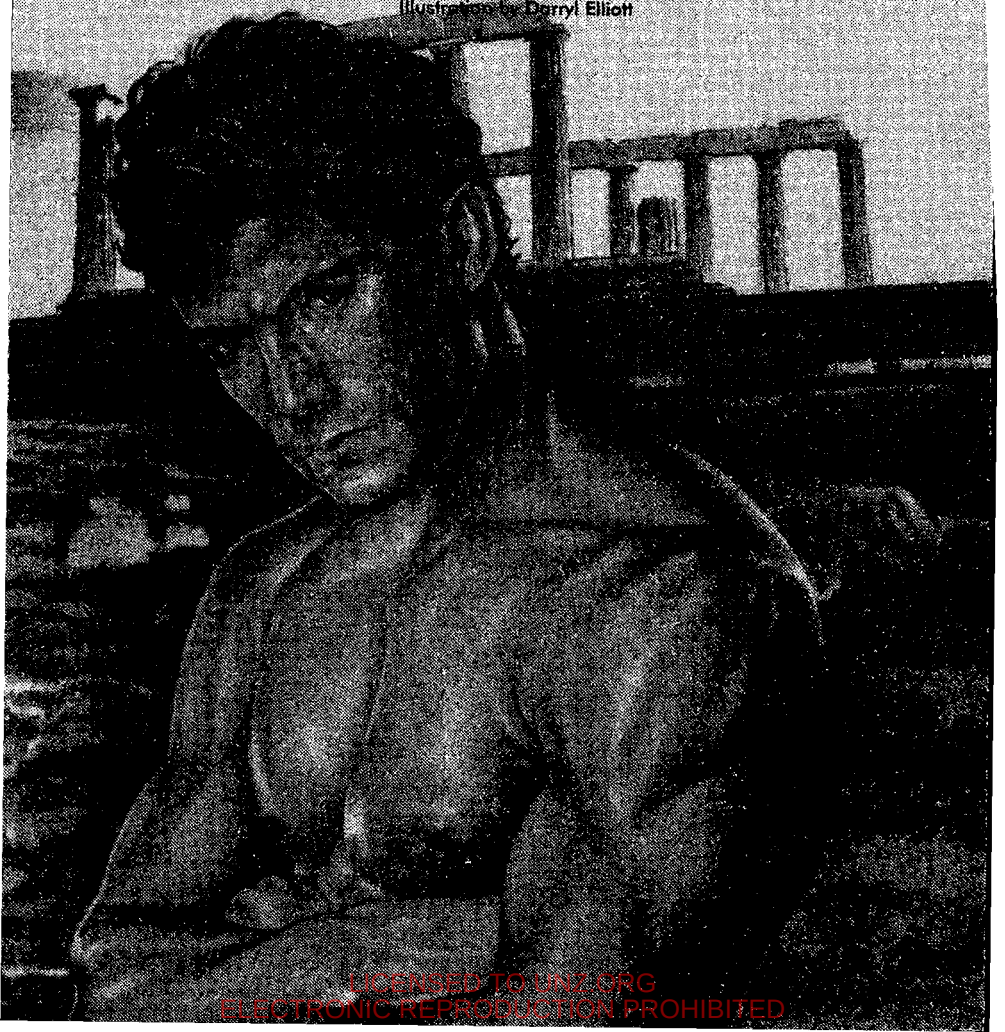
Robert Silverberg

CALL ME TITAN

Robert Silverberg's enthralling new drama splendidly evokes the work of another much-honored SF author. "Call Me Titan" was written in memory of Roger Zelazny, and it is a "conscious effort to use his manner and themes." We think Mr. Silverberg's tribute is a stunning success.

Illustration by Darryl Elliott



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"How did *you* get loose?" the woman who was Aphrodite asked me.

"It happened. Here I am."

"Yes," she said. "You. Of all of them, you. In this lovely place." She waved at the shining sun-bright sea, the glittering white stripe of the beach, the whitewashed houses, the bare brown hills. A lovely place, yes, this isle of Mykonos. "And what are you going to do now?"

"What I was created to do," I told her. "*You* know."

She considered that. We were drinking ouzo on the rocks, on the hotel patio, beneath a hanging array of fishermen's nets. After a moment she laughed, that irresistible tinkling laugh of hers, and clinked her glass against mine.

"Lots of luck," she said.

That was Greece. Before that was Sicily, and the mountain, and the eruption. . . .

The mountain had trembled and shaken and belched, and the red streams of molten fire began to flow downward from the ashen top, and in the first ten minutes of the eruption six little towns around the slopes were wiped out. It happened just that fast. They shouldn't have been there, but they were, and then they weren't. Too bad for them. But it's always a mistake to buy real estate on Mount Etna.

The lava was really rolling. It would reach the city of Catania in a couple of hours and take out its whole northeastern quarter, and all of Sicily would be in mourning the next day. Some eruption. The biggest of all time, on this island where big eruptions have been making the news since the dinosaur days.

As for me, I couldn't be sure what was happening up there at the summit, not yet. I was still down deep, way down, three miles from sunlight.

But in my jail cell down there beneath the roots of the giant volcano that is called Mount Etna I could tell from the shaking and the noise and the heat that this one was something special. That the prophesied Hour of Liberation had come round at last for me, after five hundred centuries as the prisoner of Zeus.

I stretched and turned and rolled over, and sat up for the first time in fifty thousand years.

Nothing was pressing down on me.

Ugly limping Hephaestus, my jailer, had set up his forge right on top of me long ago, his heavy anvils on my back. And had merrily hammered bronze and iron all day and all night for all he was worth, that clomp-legged old master craftsman. Where was Hephaestus now? Where were his anvils?

Not on me. Not any longer.

That was *good,* that feeling of nothing pressing down.

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I wriggled my shoulders. That took time. You have a lot of shoulders to wriggle, when you have a hundred heads, give or take three or four.

"Hephaestus?" I yelled, yelling it out of a hundred mouths at once. I felt the mountain shivering and convulsing above me, and I knew that my voice alone was enough to make great slabs of it fall off and go tumbling down, down, down.

No answer from Hephaestus. No clangor of his forge, either. He just wasn't there anymore.

I tried again, a different, greater name.

"Zeus?"

Silence.

"You hear me, Zeus?"

No reply.

"Where the hell are you? Where is everybody?"

All was silence, except for the hellish roaring of the volcano.

Well, okay, *don't* answer me. Slowly I got to my feet, extending myself to my full considerable height. The fabric of the mountain gave way for me. I have that little trick.

Another good feeling, that was, rising to an upright position. Do you know what it's like, not being allowed to stand, not even once, for fifty thousand years? But of course you don't, little ones. How could you?

One more try. *"ZEUS???"*

All my hundred voices crying his name at once, fortissimo fortissimo. A chorus of booming echoes. Every one of my heads had grown back, over the years. I was healed of all that Zeus had done to me. That was especially good, knowing that I was healed. Things had looked really bad, for a while.

Well, no sense just standing there and caterwauling, if nobody was going to answer me back. This was the Hour of Liberation, after all. I was free—my chains fallen magically away, my heads all sprouted again. Time to get out of here. I started to move.

Upward. Outward.

I moved up through the mountain's bulk as though it were so much air. The rock was nothing to me. Unimpeded I rose past the coiling internal chambers through which the lava was racing up toward the summit vent, and came out into the sunlight, and clambered up the snow-kissed slopes of the mountain to the ash-choked summit itself, and stood there right in the very center of the eruption as the volcano puked its blazing guts out. I grinned a hundred big grins on my hundred faces, with hot fierce winds swirling like swords around my head and torrents of lava flowing down all around me. The view from up there was terrific. And what a fine feeling that was, just looking around at the world again after all that time underground.

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There below me off to the east was the fish-swarming sea. Over there behind me, the serried tree-thickened hills. Above me, the fire-hearted sun.

What beautiful sights they all were!

"Hoo-*ha!*" I cried.

My jubilant roar went forth from that lofty mountaintop in Sicily like a hundred hurricanes at once. The noise of it broke windows in Rome and flattened farmhouses in Sardinia and knocked over ten mosques deep in the Tunisian Sahara. But the real blast was aimed eastward across the water, over toward Greece, and it went across that peninsula like a scythe, taking out half the treetops from Agios Nikolaus on the Ionian side to Athens over on the Aegean, and kept on going clear into Turkey.

It was a little signal, so to speak. I was heading that way myself, with some very ancient scores to settle.

I started down the mountainside, fast. The lava surging all around my thudding feet meant nothing to me.

Call me Typhoeus. Call me Titan.

I suppose I might have attracted a bit of attention as I made my way down those fiery slopes and past all the elegant seaside resorts that now were going crazy with hysteria over the eruption, and went striding into the sea midway between Fiumefreddo and Taormina. I am, after all, something of a monster, by your standards: four hundred feet high, let us say, with all those heads, dragon heads at that, and eyes that spurt flame, and thick black bristles everywhere on my body and swarms of coiling vipers sprouting from my thighs. The gods themselves have been known to turn and run at the mere sight of me. Some of them, once upon a time, fled all the way to Egypt when I yelled "Boo!"

But perhaps the eruption and the associated earthquakes kept the people of eastern Sicily so very preoccupied just then that they didn't take time to notice what sort of being it was that was walking down the side of Mount Etna and perambulating off toward the sea. Or maybe they didn't believe their eyes. Or it could be that they simply nodded and said, "Sure. Why not?"

I hit the water running and put my heads down and swam swiftly Greeceward across the cool blue sea without even bothering to come up for breath. What would have been the point? The air behind me smelled of fire and brimstone. And I was in a hurry.

Zeus, I thought. *I'm coming to get you, you bastard!*

As I said, I'm a Titan. It's the family name, not a description. We Titans were the race of Elder Gods—the first drafts, so to speak, for the deities that you people would eventually worship—the ones that Zeus walloped into oblivion long before Bill Gates came down from Mount Sinai with MS-DOS. Long before Homer sang. Long before the Flood.

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Long before, as a matter of fact, anything that might mean anything to you.

Gaea was our mother. The Earth, in other words. The mother of us all, really.

In the early days of the world broad-bosomed Gaea brought forth all sorts of gods and giants and monsters. Out of her came far-seeing Uranus, the sky, and then he and Gaea created the first dozen Titans, Oceanus and Cronus and Rhea and that bunch.

The original twelve Titans spawned a lot of others: Atlas, who now holds up the world, and tricky Prometheus, who taught humans how to use fire and got himself the world's worst case of cirrhosis for his trouble, and silly scatterbrained Epimetheus, who had that thing with Pandora, and so on. There were snake-limbed giants like Porphyrion and Alcyoneus, and hundred-armed fifteen-headed beauties like Briareus and Cottus and Gyes, and other oversized folk like the three one-eyed cyclopes, Arges of the storms and Brontes of the thunder and Steropes of the lightning, and so on. Oh, what a crowd we were!

The universe was our oyster, so I'm told. It must have been good times for all and sundry. I hadn't been born yet, in that era when Uranus was king.

But very early on there was that nasty business between Uranus and his son Cronus, which ended very badly for Uranus, the bloody little deal with the sharp sickle, and Cronus became the top god for a while, until he made the mistake of letting Zeus get born. That was it, for Cronus. In this business you have to watch out for overambitious sons. Cronus tried—he swallowed each of his children as they were born, to keep them from doing to him what he had done to Uranus—but Zeus, the last-born, eluded him. Very unfortunate for Cronus.

Family history. Dirty linen.

As for Zeus, who as you can see showed up on the scene quite late but eventually came to be in charge of things, he's my half-sister Rhea's son, so I suppose you'd call him my nephew. I call him my nemesis.

After Zeus had finished off Cronus he mopped up the rest of the Titans in a series of wild wars, thunderbolts ricocheting all over the place, the seas boiling, whole continents going up in flame. Some of us stayed neutral and some of us, I understand, actually allied themselves with him, but none of that made any difference. When all the shouting was over the whole pack of Titans were all prisoners in various disagreeable places, such as, for example, deep down underneath Mount Etna with the forge of Hephaestus sitting on your back; and Zeus and his outfit, Hades and Poseidon and Apollo and Aphrodite and the rest, ruled the roost.

I was Gaea's final experiment in maternity, the youngest of the Titans, born very late in the war with Zeus. Her final monster, some would say, because of my unusual looks and size. Tartarus was my father: the Un-

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derworld, he is. I was born restless. Dangerous, too. My job was to avenge the family against the outrages Zeus had perpetrated on the rest of us. I came pretty close, too.

And now I was looking for my second chance.

Greece had changed a lot since I last had seen it. Something called civilization had happened in the meanwhile. Highways, gas stations, telephone poles, billboards, high-rise hotels, all those nice things.

Still and all, it didn't look so very bad. That killer blue sky with the golden blink in it, the bright sparkle of the low rolling surf, the white-walled cubes of houses climbing up the brown knifeblade hillsides: a handsome land, all things considered.

I came ashore at the island of Zakynthos on the Peloponnesian coast. There was a pleasant waterfront town there with an old fortress on a hilltop and groves of olives and cypresses all around. The geological disturbances connected with my escape from my prison cell beneath Mount Etna did not appear to have done much damage here.

I decided that it was probably not a great idea to let myself be seen in my actual form, considering how monstrous I would look to mortal eyes and the complications that that would create for me. And so, as I approached the land, I acquired a human body that I found swimming a short way off shore at one of the beachfront hotels.

It was a serviceable, athletic he-body, a lean, trim one, not young but full of energy, craggy-faced, a long jaw and a long, sharp nose and a high forehead. I checked out his mind. Bright, sharp, observant. And packed with data, both standard and quirkily esoteric. All that stuff about Bill Gates and Homer and high-rises and telephone poles: I got that from him. And how to behave like a human being. And a whole lot more, all of which I suspected would be useful to acquire.

A questing, creative mind. A good person. I liked him. I decided to use him.

In half a wink I transformed myself into a simulacrum of him and went on up the beach into town, leaving him behind just as he had been, all unknowing. The duplication wouldn't matter. Nobody was likely to care that there were two of him wandering around Greece at the same time, unless they saw both of us at the same moment, which wasn't going to happen.

I did a little further prowling behind his forehead and learned that he was a foreigner in Greece, a tourist. Married, three children, a house on a hillside in a dry country that looked a little like Greece, but was far away. Spoke a language called English, knew a smattering of other tongues. Not much Greek. That would be okay: I have my ways of communicating.

To get around the countryside properly, I discovered, I was going to

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need land-clothing, money, and a passport. I took care of these matters. Details like those don't pose problems for such as we.

Then I went rummaging in his mind to see whether he had any information in there about the present whereabouts of Zeus.

It was a very orderly mind. He had Zeus filed under "Greek Mythology."

Mythology?

Yes. Yes! He knew about Gaea, and Uranus, and the overthrow of Uranus by Cronus. He knew about the other Titans, at any rate some of them—Prometheus, Rhea, Hyperion, Iapetus. He knew some details about a few of the giants and miscellaneous hundred-armed monsters, and about the war between Zeus and the Titans and the Titans' total downfall, and the takeover by the big guy and his associates, Poseidon and Apollo and Ares & Company. But these were all stories to him. Fables. *Mythology.*

I confess I looked in his well-stocked mental archives for myself, Typhoeus—even a Titan has some vanity, you know—but all I found was a reference that said, "Typhon, child of Hera, is often confused with the earlier Titan Typhoeus, son of Gaea and Tartarus."

Well, yes. The names are similar; but Typhon was the bloated she-dragon that Apollo slew at Delphi, and what does that have to do with me?

That was bad, very bad, to show up in this copiously furnished mind only as a correction of an erroneous reference to someone else. Humiliating, you might actually say. I am not as important as Cronus or Uranus in the scheme of things, I suppose, but I did have my hour of glory, that time I went up against Zeus single-handed and came very close to defeating him. But what was even worse than such neglect, far worse, was to have the whole splendid swaggering tribe of us, from the great mother Gaea and her heavenly consort down to the merest satyr and wood-nymph, tucked away in there as so much mythology.

What had happened to the world, and to its gods, while I lay writhing under Etna?

Mount Olympus seemed a reasonable first place for me to go to look for some answers.

I was at the absolute wrong end of Greece for that: down in the southwestern corner, whereas Olympus is far up in the northeast. All decked out in my new human body and its new human clothes, I caught a hydrofoil ferry to Patra, on the mainland, and another ferry across the Gulf of Corinth to Nafpaktos, and then, by train and bus, made my way up toward Thessaly, where Olympus is. None of these places except Olympus itself had been there last time I was in Greece, nor were there such things as trains or ferries or buses then. But I'm adaptable. I am, after all, an immortal god. A sort of a god, anyway.

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It was interesting, sitting among you mortals in those buses and trains. I had never paid much attention to you in the old days, any more than I would give close attention to ants or bumblebees or cockroaches. Back there in the early ages of the world, humans were few and far between, inconsequential experimental wildlife. Prometheus made you, you know, for some obscure reason of his own: made you out of assorted dirt and slime, and breathed life into you, and turned you loose to decorate the landscape. You certainly did a job of decorating it, didn't you?

Sitting there among you in those crowded garlicky trains, breathing your exhalations and smelling your sweat, I couldn't help admiring the persistence and zeal with which you people had covered so much of the world with your houses, your highways, your shopping malls, your amusement parks, your stadiums, your power-transmission lines, and your garbage. Especially your garbage. Very few of these things could be considered any sort of an improvement over the basic virgin terrain, but I had to give you credit for effort, anyway. Prometheus, wherever he might be now, would surely be proud of you.

But where *was* Prometheus? Still chained up on that mountaintop, with Zeus' eagle gnawing away on his liver?

I roamed the minds of my traveling companions, but they weren't educated people like the one I had chanced upon at that beach, and they knew zero about Prometheus. Or anybody else of my own era, for that matter, with the exception of Zeus and Apollo and Athena and a few of the other latecomer gods. Who also were mere mythology to them. Greece had different gods these days, it seemed. Someone called Christos had taken over here. Along with his father and his mother, and assorted lesser deities whose relation to the top ones was hard to figure out.

Who were these new gods? Where had they come from? I was pleased by the thought that Zeus had been pushed aside by this Christos the way he had nudged old Cronus off the throne, but how had it happened? When?

Would I find Christos living on top of Mount Olympus in Zeus' old palace?

Well, no. I very shortly discovered that nobody was living on top of Olympus at all.

The place had lost none of its beauty, infested though modern-day Greece is by you and your kind. The enormous plateau on which the mountain stands is still unspoiled; and Olympus itself rises as ever in that great soaring sweep above the wild, desolate valley, the various summits forming a spectacular natural amphitheater and the upper tiers of rock splendidly shrouded by veils of cloud.

There are some roads going up, now. In the foothills I hired a car and a driver to take me through the forests of chestnut and fir to a refuge hut two thirds of the way up that is used by climbers, and there I left my dri-

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ver, telling him I would go the rest of the way myself. He gave me a peculiar look, I suppose because I was wearing the wrong kind of clothing for climbing, and had no mountaineering equipment with me.

When he was gone, I shed my borrowed human form and rose up once again taller than the tallest tree in the world, and gave myself a set of gorgeous black-feathered wings as well, and went wafting up into that region of clean, pure air where Zeus had once had his throne.

No throne. No Zeus.

My cousins the giants Otus and Ephialtes had piled Mount Pelion on top of Mount Ossa to get up here during the war of the gods, and were flung right back down again. But I had the place to myself, unchallenged. I hovered over the jagged fleece-kissed peaks of the ultimate summit, spiraling down through the puffs of white cloud, ready for battle, but no battle was offered me.

"Zeus? Zeus?"

Once I had stood against him hissing terror from my grim jaws, and my eyes flaring gorgon lightning that had sent his fellow gods packing in piss-pants terror. But Zeus had withstood me, then. He blasted me with sizzling thunderbolts and seared me to an ash, and hurled me to rack and ruin; and jammed what was left of me down under Mount Etna amid rivers of fire, with the craftsman god Hephaestus piling the tools of his workshop all over me to hold me down, and there I lay for those fifty thousand years, muttering to myself, until I had healed enough to come forth.

I was forth now, all right, and looking for a rematch. Etna had vomited rivers of fire all over the fair plains of Sicily, and I was loose upon the world; but where was my adversary?

"Zeus!" I cried, into the emptiness.

I tried the name of Christos, too, just to see if the new god would answer. No go. He wasn't there either. Olympus was as stunning as ever, but nobody godly seemed to have any use for it these days.

I flew back down to the Alpine Club shelter and turned myself back into the lean-shanked American tourist with the high forehead and the long nose. I think three hikers may have seen me make the transformation, for as I started down the slope I came upon them standing slack-jawed and goggle-eyed, as motionless as though Medusa had smitten them into stone.

"Hi, there, fellas," I called to them. "Have a nice day!"

They just gaped. I descended the fir-darkened mountainside to the deep-breasted valley, and just like any hungry mortal I ate dolmades and keftedes and moussaka in a little taverna I found down there, washing it down with a few kilos of retsina. And then, not so much like any mortal, I walked halfway across the country to Athens. It took me a goodly number of days, resting only a few hours every night. The body I had copied was a fundamentally sturdy one, and of course I had bolstered it a little.

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A long walk, yes. But I was beginning to comprehend that there was no need for me to hurry, and I wanted to see the sights.

Athens was a horror. It was the kingdom of Hades risen up to the surface of the world. Noise, congestion, all-around general grittiness, indescribable ugliness, everything in a miserable state of disrepair, and the air so thick with foul vapor that you could scratch your initials in it with your fingernails, if you had initials, if you had fingernails.

I knew right away I wasn't going to find any members of the old pantheon in *this* town. No deity in his right mind would want to spend ten minutes here. But Athens is the city of Athena, and Athena is the goddess of knowledge, and I thought there might be a possibility that somewhere here in her city I would be able to learn how and why and when the assorted divinities of Greece had made the transition from omnipotence to mythology, and where I might find them (or at least the one I was looking for) now.

I prowled the nightmare streets. Dust and sand and random blocks of concrete everywhere, rusting metal girders standing piled for no particular reason by the side of the road, crumbling buildings. Traffic, frantic and fierce: what a mistake giving up the ox-cart had been! Cheap, tacky shops. Skinny, long-legged cats hissed at me. They knew what I was. I hissed right back. We understood each other, at least.

Up on a hilltop in the middle of everything, a bunch of ruined marble temples. The Acropolis, that hilltop is, the highest and holiest place in town. The temples aren't bad, as mortal buildings go, but in terrible shape, fallen columns scattered hither and yon, caryatids eroded to blurs by the air pollution. Why are you people such dreadful custodians of your own best works?

I went up there to look around, thinking I might find some lurking god or demigod in town on a visit. I stood by the best of the tumble-down temples, the one called the Parthenon, and listened to a little man with big eyeglasses who was telling a group of people who looked exactly like him how the building had looked when it was new and Athena was still in town. He spoke a language that my host body didn't understand at all, but I made a few adjustments and comprehended. So many languages, you mortals! *We* all spoke the same language, and that was good enough for us; but we were only gods, I suppose.

When he was through lecturing them about the Parthenon, the tour guide said, "Now we will visit the Sanctuary of Zeus. This way, please."

The Sanctuary of Zeus was just back of the Parthenon, but there really wasn't very much left of it. The tour guide did a little routine about Zeus as father of the gods, getting six facts out of every five wrong.

"Let me tell you a few things about Zeus," I wanted to say, but I didn't. "How he used to cheat at cards, for instance. And the way he couldn't

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keep his hands off young girls. Or, maybe, the way he bellowed and moaned the first time he and I fought, when I tangled him in the coils of my snakes and laid him low, and cut the tendons of his hands and feet to keep him from getting rambunctious, and locked him up in that cave in Cilicia."

I kept all that to myself. These people didn't look like they'd care to hear any commentary from a stranger. Anyway, if I told that story I'd feel honor bound to go on and explain how that miserable sneak Hermes crept into the cave when I wasn't looking and patched Zeus up—and then how, once Zeus was on his feet again, he came after me and let me have it with such a blast of lightning bolts that I was fried halfway to a crisp and wound up spending the next few epochs as a prisoner down there under Etna.

A dispiriting place, the Acropolis.

I went slinking down and over to the Plaka, which is the neighborhood in back of the ruins, for some lunch. Human bodies need to be fed again and again, all day long. Swordfish grilled on skewers with onions and tomatoes; more retsina; fruit and cheese. All right. Not bad. Then to the National Museum, a two-hour walk, sweat-sticky and dusty. Where I looked at broken statues and bought a guidebook that told me about the gods whose statues these were. Not even close to the actualities, any of them. Did they seriously think that brawny guy with the beard was Poseidon? And the woman with the tin hat, Athena? And that blowhard—Zeus? Don't make me laugh. Please. My laughter destroys whole cities.

Nowhere in the whole museum were there any representations of Titans. Just Zeus, Apollo, Aphrodite, Poseidon, and the rest of them, the junior varsity, the whole mob of supplanters, over and over and over. It was as if we didn't count at all in the historical record.

That hurt. I was in one hell of a sour mood when I left the museum.

There was a Temple of Olympian Zeus in town, the guidebook said, somewhere back in the vicinity of the Acropolis. I kept hoping that I would find some clue to Zeus' present place of residence at one of the sites that once had been sacred to him. A vestige, a lingering whiff of divinity.

But the Temple of Olympian Zeus was nothing but an incomplete set of ruined columns, and the only whiff I picked up there was the whiff of mortality and decay. And now it was getting dark and the body I was inhabiting was hungry again. Back to the Plaka; grilled meat, wine, a sweet pudding.

Afterward, as I roamed the winding streets leading down to the newer part of the city with no special purpose in mind, a feeble voice out of a narrow alley said, in the native language of my host body, "Help! Oh, please, help!"

I was not put into this world for the purpose of helping anyone. But the body that I had duplicated in order to get around in modern Greece was

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evidently the body of a kindly and responsible person, because his reflexes took over instantly, and I found myself heading into that alleyway to see what aid I could render the person who was so piteously crying out.

Deep in the shadows I saw someone—a woman, I realized—lying on the ground in what looked like a pool of blood. I went to her side and knelt by her, and she began to mutter something in a bleary way about being attacked and robbed.

"Can you sit up?" I said, slipping my arm around her back. "It'll be easier for me to carry you if—"

Then I felt a pair of hands grasping me by the shoulders, not gently, and something hard and sharp pressing against the middle of my back, and the supposedly bloodied and battered woman I was trying to help rolled deftly out of my grasp and stepped back without any trouble at all, and a disagreeable rasping voice at my left ear said quietly, "Just give us your wristwatch and your wallet and you won't get hurt at all."

I was puzzled for a moment. I was still far from accustomed to human ways, and it was often necessary to peer into my host-mind to find out what was going on.

Quickly, though, I came to understand that there was such a thing as crime in your world, and that some of it was being tried on me at this very moment. The woman in the alley was bait; I was the prey; two accomplices had been lurking in the shadows.

I suppose I could have given them my wristwatch and wallet without protest, and let them make their escape. What did a wristwatch mean to me? And I could create a thousand new wallets just like the one I had, which I had created also, after all. As for harm, they could do me none with their little knife. I had survived even the lightnings of Zeus. Perhaps I should have reacted with godlike indifference to their little attempt at mugging me.

But it had been a long dreary discouraging day, and a hot one, too. The air was close and vile-smelling. Maybe I had allowed my host body to drink a little too much retsina with dinner. In any event, godlike indifference was not what I displayed just then. Mortal petulance was more like the appropriate term.

"Behold me, fools," I said.

I let them see my true form.

There I was before them, sky-high, mountainous, a horrendous gigantic figure of many heads and fiery eyes and thick black bristles and writhing viperish excrescences, a sight to make even gods quail.

Of course, inasmuch as I'm taller than the tallest tree and appropriately wide, manifesting myself in such a narrow alleyway might have posed certain operational problems. But I have access to dimensions unavailable to you, and I made room for myself there with the proper interpenetrational configurations. Not that it mattered to the three muggers,

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because they were dead of shock the moment they saw me towering before them.

I raised my foot and ground them into the pavement like noxious vermin.

Then, in the twinkling of an eye, I was once more a slender, lithe, middle-aged American tourist with thinning hair and a kindly smile, and there were three dark spots on the pavement of the alley, and that was that.

It was, I admit, overkill.

But I had had a trying day. In fact, I had had a trying fifty thousand years.

Athens had been so hellish that it put me in mind of the authentic kingdom of Hades, and so that was my next destination, for I thought I might get some answers down there among the dead. It wasn't much of a trip, not for me. I opened a vortex for myself and slipped downward and there right in front of me were the black poplars and willows of the Grove of Persephone, with Hades' Gate just behind it.

"Cerberus?" I called. "Here, doggy doggy doggy! Good Cerberus! Come say hello to Daddy!"

Where was he, my lovely dog, my own sweet child? For I myself was the progenitor of the three-headed guardian of the gate of Hell, by virtue of my mating with my sister, Tartarus and Gaea's scaly-tailed daughter Echidna. We made the Harpies too, did Echidna and I, and the Chimera, and Scylla, and also the Hydra, a whole gaudy gorgeous brood of monsters. But of all my children I was always most fond of Cerberus, for his loyalty. How I loved to see him come running toward me when I called! What pleasure I took in his serpent-bristled body, his voice like clanging bronze, his slavering jaws that dripped black venom!

This day, though, I wandered dogless through the Underworld. There was no sign of Cerberus anywhere, no trace even of his glittering turds. Hell's Gate stood open and the place was deserted. I saw nothing of Charon the boatman of the Styx, nor Hades and Queen Persephone, nor any members of their court, nor the spirits of the dead who should have been in residence here. An abandoned warehouse, dusty and empty. Quickly I fled toward the sunshine.

The island of Delos was where I went next, looking for Apollo. Delos is, or was, his special island, and Apollo had always struck me as the coolest, most level-headed member of the Zeus bunch. Perhaps he had survived whatever astounding debacle it was that had swept the Olympian gods away. And, if so, maybe he could give me a clue to Zeus' current location.

Big surprise! I went to Delos, but no Apollo.

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It was yet another dismal disillusioning journey through the tumble-down sadness that is Greece. This time I flew; not on handsome black-feathered wings, but on a clever machine, a metal tube called an airplane, full of travelers looking more or less like me in my present form. It rose up out of Athens in a welter of sound and fury and took up a course high above the good old wine-dark sea, speckled with tawny archipelagos, and in very short order came down on a small dry island to the south. This island was called Mykonos, and there I could buy myself passage in one of the boats that made outings several times a day to nearby Delos.

Delos was a dry rubble-field, strewn with fragments of temples, their columns mostly broken off close to the ground. Some marble lions were still intact, lean and vigilant, crouching on their hind legs. They looked hungry. But there wasn't much else to see. The place had the parched gloom of death about it, the bleak aura of extinction.

I returned to Mykonos on the lunchtime boat, and found myself lodgings in a hillside hotel a short distance outside the pretty little narrow-streeted shorefront town. I ordered some more mortal food and drank mortal drink. My borrowed body needed such things.

It was on Mykonos that I met Aphrodite.

Or, rather, she met me.

I was sitting by myself, minding my own business, in the hotel's outdoor bar, which was situated on a cobblestoned patio bedecked with mosaics and hung with nets and oars and other purported fishing artifacts. I was on my third ouzo of the hour, which possibly was a bit much for the capacities of the body I was using, and I was staring down the hillside pensively at, well, what I have to call the wine-dark sea. (Greece brings out the clichés in anyone. Why should I resist?)

A magnificent long-legged full-bodied blonde woman came over to me and said, in a wonderfully throaty, husky voice, "New in town, sailor?"

I stared at her, astounded.

There was the unmistakable radiance of divinity about her. My Geiger counter of godliness was going clickity-clack, full blast. I should not have failed to pick up her emanations the moment I arrived on Mykonos. But I hadn't, not until she was standing right next to me. She had picked up mine, though.

"Who are you?" I blurted.

"Won't you ask a lady to sit down, even?"

I jumped to my feet like a nervous schoolboy, hauled a deck chair scrapingly across and positioned it next to mine, and bowed her into it. Then I wigwagged for a waiter. "What do you want to drink?" I rasped. My throat was dry. Nervous schoolboy, yes, indeed.

"I'll have what you're having."

"*Parakalo,* ouzo on the rocks," I told the waiter.

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She had showers of golden hair tumbling to shoulder length, and cat-like yellow eyes, and full ripe lips that broke naturally into the warmest of smiles. The aroma that came from her was one of young wine and green fields at sunrise and swift-coursing streams, but also of lavender and summer heat, of night rain, of surging waves, of midnight winds.

I knew I was consorting with the enemy. I didn't care.

"Which one are you?" I said again.

"Guess."

"Aphrodite would be too obvious. You're probably Ares, or Hephaestus, or Poseidon."

She laughed, a melodic cadenza of merriment that ran right through the scale and into the infra-voluptuous. "You give me too much credit for deviousness. But I like your way of thinking. Ares in drag, really? Poseidon with a close shave? Hephaestus with a blonde wig?" She leaned close. The fragrance of her took on hurricane intensity. "You were right the first time."

"Aphrodite."

"None other. I live in Los Angeles now. Taking a little holiday in the mother country. And you? You're one of the old ones, aren't you?"

"How can you tell?"

"The archaic emanation you give off. Something out of the pre-Olympian past." She clinked the ice-cubes thoughtfully in her glass, took a long pull of the ouzo, stared me straight in the eyes. "Prometheus? Tethys?" I shook my head. "Someone of that clan, though. I thought all of you old ones were done for a long time ago. But there's definitely a Titan vibe about you. Which one, I wonder? Most likely one of the really strange ones. Thaumas? Phorcys?"

"Stranger than those," I said.

She took a few more guesses. Not even close.

"Typhoeus," I told her finally.

We walked into town for dinner. People turned to look at us in the narrow streets. At her, I mean. She was wearing a filmy orange sun-dress with nothing under it and when you were east of her on a westbound street you got quite a show.

"You really don't think that I'm going to find Zeus?" I asked her.

"Let's say you have your work cut out for you."

"Well, so be it. I *have* to find him."

"Why is that?"

"It's my job," I said. "There's nothing personal about it. I'm the designated avenger. It's my sole purpose in existence: to punish Zeus for his war against the children of Gaea. You know that."

"The war's been over a long time, Typhoeus. You might as well let bygones be bygones. Anyway, it's not as though Zeus got to enjoy his victo-

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ry for long." We were in the middle of the maze of narrow winding streets that is Mykonos Town. She pointed to a cheerful little restaurant called Catherine's. "Let's go in here. I ate here last night and it was pretty good."

We ordered a bottle of white wine. "I like the body you found for yourself," she said. "Not particularly handsome, no, but *pleasing*. The eyes are especially nice. Warm and trustworthy, but also keen, penetrating."

I would not be drawn away from the main theme. "What happened to the Olympians?" I asked.

"Died off, most of them. One by one. Of neglect. Starvation."

"Immortal gods don't die."

"Some do, some don't. You know that. Didn't Argus of the Hundred Eyes kill your very own Echidna? And did she come back to life?"

"But the major gods—"

"Even if they don't die, they can be forgotten, and the effect's pretty much the same. While you were locked up under Etna, new gods came in. There wasn't even a battle. They just moved in, and we had to move along. We disappeared entirely."

"So I've noticed."

"Yes. Totally out of business. You've seen the shape our temples are in? Have you seen anybody putting out burnt offerings to us? No, no, it's all over for us, the worship, the sacrifices. Has been for a long time. We went into exile, the whole kit and caboodle of us, scattered across the world. I'm sure a lot of us simply died, despite that theoretical immortality of ours. Some hung on, I suppose. But it's a thousand years since the last time I saw any of them."

"Which ones did you see then?"

"Apollo—he was getting gray and paunchy. And I caught sight of Hermes, once—I think it was Hermes—slow and short-winded, and limping like Hephaestus."

"And Zeus?" I asked. "You never ran into him anywhere, after you all left Olympus?"

"No. Never even once."

I pondered that. "So how did *you* manage to stay so healthy?"

"I'm Aphrodite. The life-force. Beauty. Passion. Those things don't go out of fashion for long. I've done all right for myself, over the years."

"Ah. Yes. Obviously you have."

The waitress fluttered around us. I was boiling with questions to ask Aphrodite, but it was time to order, and that was what we did. The usual Greek things, stuffed grape leaves, grilled fish, overcooked vegetables. Another bottle of wine. My head was pulsating. The restaurant was small, crowded, a whirlpool of noise. The nearness of Aphrodite was overwhelming. I felt dizzy. It was a surprisingly pleasant sensation.

I said, after a time, "I'm convinced that Zeus is still around somewhere.

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I'm going to find him and this time I'm going to whip his ass and put *him* under Mount Etna."

"It's amazing how much like a small boy an immortal being can be. Even one as huge and frightful as you."

My face turned hot. I said nothing.

"Forget Zeus," she urged. "Forget Typhoeus, too. Stay human. Eat, drink, be merry." Her eyes were glistening. I felt as if I were falling forward, tumbling into the sweet chasm between her breasts. "We could take a trip together. I'd teach you how to enjoy yourself. How to enjoy me, too. Tell me: have you ever been in love?"

"Echidna and I—"

"Echidna! Yes! You and she got together and made a bunch of hideous monsters like yourselves, with too many heads and drooling fangs. I don't mean Echidna. This is Earth, here and now. I'm a woman now and you're a man."

"But Zeus—"

"Zeus," she said scornfully. She made the name of the Lord of Olympus sound like an obscenity.

We finished eating and I paid the check and we went outside into the mild, breezy Mykonos night, strolling for fifteen or twenty minutes, winding up finally in a dark, deserted part of the town, a warehouse district down by the water, where the street was no more than five feet wide and empty shuttered buildings with whitewashed walls bordered us on both sides.

She turned to me there and pulled me abruptly up against her. Her eyes were bright with mischief. Her lips sought mine. With a little hissing sound she nudged me backward until I was leaning against a wall, and she was pressing me tight, and currents of energy that could have fried a continent were passing between us. I think there could have been no one, not man nor god, who would not have wanted to trade places with me just then.

"Quickly! The hotel!" she whispered.

"The hotel, yes."

We didn't bother to walk. That would have taken too long. In a flash we vanished ourselves from that incomprehensible tangle of maze-like streets and reappeared in her room at our hotel, and from then to dawn she and I generated such a delirium of erotic force that the entire island shook and shivered with the glorious sturm and drang of it. We heaved and thrust and moaned and groaned, and rivers of sweat ran from our bodies and our hearts pounded and thundered and our eyes rolled in our heads from giddy exhaustion, for we allowed ourselves the luxury of mortal limitations for the sake of the mortal joy of transcending those limitations. But because we *weren't* mortal we also had the option of renewing our strength whenever we had depleted it, and we exercised that option

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many a time before rosy-fingered dawn came tiptoeing up over the high-palisaded eastern walls.

Naked, invisible to prying eyes, Aphrodite and I walked then hand in hand along the morning-shimmering strand of the fish-swarming sea, and she murmured to me of the places we would go, the things we would experience.

"The Taj Mahal," she said. "And the summer palace at Udaipur. Persepolis and Isfahan in springtime. Baalbek. Paris, of course. Carcassonne. Iguazu Falls, and the Blue Mosque, and the Fountains of the Blue Nile. We'll make love in the Villa of Tiberius on Capri—and between the paws of the Sphinx—and in the snow on top of Mount Everest—"

"Yes," I said. "Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes."

And what I was thinking was, *Zeus. Zeus. Zeus. Zeus.*

And so we travel about the world together, Aphrodite and I, seeing the things in it that are beautiful, and there are many of those; and so she distracts me from my true task. For the time being. It is very pleasant, traveling with Aphrodite; and so I permit myself to be distracted this way.

But I have not forgotten my purpose. And this is my warning to the world.

I am a restless being, a mighty thrusting force. I was created that way. My adversary doesn't seem currently to be around. But Zeus is here somewhere. I know he is. He wears a mask. He disguises himself as a mortal, either because it amuses him to do so, or because he has no choice, for there is something in the world of which he is afraid, something from which he must hide himself, some god greater even than Zeus, as Zeus was greater than Cronus and Cronus was greater than Uranus.

But I will find him. And when I do, I will drop this body and take on my own form again. I will stand mountain-high, and you will see my hundred heads, and my fires will flash and rage. And Zeus and I will enter into combat once more, and this time I will surely win.

It will happen.

I promise you that, O small ones. I warn you. It will happen.

You will tremble then. I'm sorry for that. The mind that came with this body I wear now has taught me something about compassion; and so I regret the destruction I will inevitably visit upon you, because it cannot be avoided, when Zeus and I enter into our struggle. You have my sincerest apologies, in advance. Protect yourselves as best you can. But for me there can be no turning away from my task.

Zeus? This is Typhoeus the Titan who calls you!

Zeus, where are you? ●

—In Memoriam: RZ

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SYSTEM CRASH

Between June and July this year
my father disappeared
into regions of dementia

Delicate neural connections
fused forever
leaving the hard-wired husk

Which eats and reads
and watches TV
Looking emptily out at the world

"Hide the knives!
He acts on impulse now,
delusions make him anxious"

I went to say good-bye and found
a shell to be steered
through unprogrammable days and nights

There was no back-up disk

—Peg Healy

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Mary Rosenblum & James Sarafin

ONE GOOD JUROR

Long-time *Asimov's* contributor Mary Rosenblum joins newcomer James Sarafin in a mesmerizing look at what "One Good Juror" can mean to a plaintiff. The story was the result of a conversation about justice versus the law, both in the present and in the future. Ms. Rosenblum thought the tale presented them with "an interesting opportunity to consider the evolution of our legal system." Mr. Sarafin has worked as a civil trial lawyer in Alaska for the past fifteen years. Although the following tale is his first to appear in our pages, he currently has two other stories in our inventory.

Illustration by Anthony Bari

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At first, it looked as if she had lost before she'd even started. The defense attorney finished his argument, took his seat at the opposing counsel's table, looking relaxed and confident. For a moment, the courtroom was silent; Erin heard only the blood coursing in her own ears as she completed the download of her client's e-files.

"Ms. Mendel?" the judge said. Erin rose slowly. She had commenced scanning the data, which made it a struggle to vocalize.

"Your Honor, a moment please. I'm still coming up to speed on the case."

She addressed a simulacrum seated behind a raised bench at the end of the courtroom. The judge's image, of an elderly, bespectacled woman, was larger than life-size in order to increase her presence and authority in the courtroom. But factors like apparent sex and age were largely irrelevant for assessing the temperament of an artificial judicial intelligence. Much more important would be a knowledge of the early cases on which this judge had learned and evolved its decision-making ability. Erin didn't have time to look up that information.

"The court permitted your last-minute substitution as counsel for the plaintiff," the judge was saying, in a severe, schoolmarmish voice and diction, "but not at the cost of delaying these proceedings. Now, please respond to Mr. Clark's points and advise the court of any reasons why your client's claims should not be dismissed as a matter of law."

Erin had barely heard defense counsel's argument. All she had known when she'd walked into the courtroom ten minutes earlier was that she represented the plaintiff in a products liability case. A high-profile one, judging from all the media reps and curious citizens she had to squeeze past in the doorway and who now filled the spectator seats.

She cleared her throat. The judge wouldn't wait any longer. She had to say something, right now, or she would be hit with time or monetary sanctions.

"Your Honor," she began—the client, what was his name again? "Mr. Polk has suffered brain damage as a result of using the product manufactured and distributed by the defendant." She hoped she was getting this much right. Yes—there it was in the medical records. "Permanent, steadily increasing erosion of long-term memory, loss of personality, as a direct and proximate result of—"

The judge interrupted. "Yes, Ms. Mendel. As I understand it, causation isn't disputed. Is that correct, Mr. Clark?"

Good—if she'd pegged Clark right, he loved the sound of his own voice too much to stop at a simple yes or no. She might pick up another minute or two.

"Yes, Your Honor." Clark gathered himself to his feet. "We don't deny that use of our product can cause such injuries, but only in a statistically insignificant number of cases. This risk is outweighed by benefits to several million other users for whom the product is perfectly safe."

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"Then the only question is whether the product is defective. You should proceed to address that point, Ms. Mendel."

What was the product? She accessed her predecessor's discovery files. Design drawings, pages of technical specifications flickered through her mind. Come on, the common name is good enough for now. . . .

My God. It was the cerebral implant made by NeuroTek, Inc.

The same implant she wore inside her own head, was using right now.

Erin had tried enough cases to let none of her shock come to the surface of her face; she recovered quickly, even as she became aware of the latest medical studies showing that Polk was far from alone.

"This injury has been reported in 987 other users of the NeuroTek implant," she told the judge. "How could it not be defect—"

"Objection, Your Honor," Clark said, rising to his feet. "Evidence of other product injuries is prejudicial, and not admissible in cases where causation is undisputed."

"Correct," the judge said. Erin realized why NeuroTek had not disputed that the implant had caused the brain damage. She would have to find a different approach.

"A moment, Your Honor, to confer with my client?" The judge might be impatient with the delay, but would not refuse her this.

The judge removed her spectacles and glared. "Please make it quick, Counselor."

She leaned over to the man seated at the table beside her. Ephraim Polk had a slight, wiry build, good, disciplined posture, and a face that could not be called handsome but was striking nonetheless. She had seen his unsmiling photo somewhere before, she was sure, in a news clip or magazine perhaps, but it had given little hint of the impact he made in person, seated at close range.

"How long did you wear the implant?" she whispered. Erin turned an ear toward him and closed her eyes, as if listening. She did want to know the answer, but right now it was far less important than the few seconds she gained to scan the evidence offered to the court by the client's former lawyer.

Polk's features wrinkled in thought. "I'm . . . not sure."

"Keep thinking about it, and say something back to me whether you recall or not."

During this exchange, Erin accessed the depositions of both sides' expert witnesses, including the neurobiologists. She was annoyed to find herself glancing sideways at Polk as she did.

What was the law here? She had never handled a products liability suit, on either the plaintiff's or defense side; she had warned him of that. Still, he had begged her to represent him.

"I just can't remember, for sure." Polk's head was bowed in thought. "Must have been around the time I started working professionally in news art. Whenever that was."

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She was nodding her head, but her attention had turned away from scanning her implant's internal buffer to connecting to the Net's law library.

"Ms. Mendel, the court is losing patience." The judge removed her spectacles, shook them for emphasis at the side of her head; as she did so, the whole side of her face there twisted up, eyebrow rising, mouth half-grimacing into a smile, even an ear wiggling out, as if these features were connected by invisible strings to the spectacles. The effect was ludicrous, and Erin had to stifle a smile. Must be a glitch in the personality-to-image interface; or else the interface was simply attempting to manifest some quirk in the judge's core personality.

Erin straightened, not yet having received a response to her legal search.

"Your Honor, I call the court's attention to a factual dispute in the expert testimony. The defense expert does claim the product is reasonably safe for its intended use. But the plaintiff's expert, Dr. Singh, opines that the NeuroTek implant is unreasonably dangerous, and that incorporation of a different wetware interface probably would have avoided the—Mr. Polk's injury."

"Yes, but what about the cost issue? As Mr. Clark has pointed out, the Product Liability Reform Act, as amended in 2034, was intended to free consumers of the unreasonable costs of safety measures that benefit only a minority of individuals. The NeuroTek product has received federal approval, and its safety warnings are adequate as a matter of law. The court has reviewed the recordings of Dr. Singh's testimony—he nowhere suggests that NeuroTek could have used a different wetware interface without increasing the product's cost, does he?"

The results of Erin's own legal search had come back, and she confirmed that the law was indeed as unfavorable as the judge described. There had to be something more in Singh's testimony. . . .

"Yes, he does, Your Honor, he just uses different terminology. He says that alternative, safer interfaces are, quote, 'readily available,' and refers to several competing products manufactured in China and India that use these safer interfaces and are marketed at competitive prices."

This had to be the way, she knew in her gut; the judge's hesitation told her that much. A judicial intelligence had to be careful to avoid any decision that might depend even slightly on fine distinctions or idiosyncrasies in human spoken or body language. After all, the appeals court justices were human.

Clark was on his feet again. "Your Honor, if I may . . . Dr. Singh's views are on the lunatic fringe of brain implant technology."

"His views may be in the minority," Erin said, "but even the defense expert has conceded that the issue remains unresolved to a scientific certainty, and that Dr. Singh's views represent one possible valid approach."

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"That is correct," the judge said. "The court finds that Dr. Singh's opinions are based on valid science and are thus admissible evidence."

Erin had shut-down her scans and now focused everything on her argument. "And the question of which of two competing but equally valid scientific approaches is more persuasive has to be resolved by a human juror, on the basis of the relative credibility of the expert witnesses' testimony and demeanor."

For a long moment, the courtroom was silent again. Erin knew the judge was reviewing all reported decisions and authorities related to the issue. In this instance, she hoped, the AI would act like a human trial judge and adopt the safest course. Finally, the judge ruled.

"The defendant's motion for summary judgment dismissing the plaintiff's claims is denied. The alternative motion for determination of law of the case is granted. This matter is hereby scheduled for trial commencing next Monday at 8:30 A.M. The juror shall be instructed that he or she may find that defendant's product is defective only if the evidence shows that it could have been designed or manufactured to prevent this injury without a significant increase in the cost of the product."

How in the world are we supposed to prove that? Erin wondered.

"Counsel shall adhere to a three-day trial schedule. The case shall be given to the juror no later than 3:30 P.M. on Wednesday. Any delays or violations of the evidence rules shall be met with time or monetary sanctions."

"What does this mean?" Polk whispered.

"It means you've won your right to a trial," she told him. "But we're in big trouble."

Ephraim wondered if he had made a mistake in hiring Erin Mendel. Her office shocked him, and he let her see it.

"Come in." She admitted him stiffly, squeezing up against the holowindow so that he could get around the end of her desk to the empty chair that was obviously meant for him.

There was no reason to spend money for the ostentation of expensive space if your reputation was made in the courtroom, Ephraim supposed. But after Derocher's spacious office with its real window and woolen carpeting, this . . . closet seemed more symbolic perhaps than it should have.

"Mr. Polk." She offered him a long-fingered hand. "I'm sorry that I had to literally rush in at the eleventh hour. But you didn't leave me much time when you asked me to represent you." She tilted her head, her eyes steady on his face. They were green, he noticed—the kind of green that could look cold as arctic seawater. "Suppose we talk about your case. Now that we have actually been awarded a trial."

"Why did you say we were in trouble?" He tried to moderate his tone. Ms. Mendel was the only lawyer who had been willing to take the case after Derocher dumped him, after all.

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"You're getting a trial because the AI deferred to the human ability to assess credibility and interpret nuances of human language." She was still studying him. "That doesn't mean you have much hope of winning. This kind of product liability case has been unsuccessful in nearly every instance in the last decade."

"The judge said something about deciding if the cost of using a safer interface was significant. My God!" He unclenched his fists with an effort. "How can any amount of money be significant compared to what . . . what's happening to me?"

"*That* is exactly what we need to convey to the juror," she said crisply. "So talk to me, please."

"What about? You got all the stuff from Derocher, didn't you? He said he'd upload it." Ephraim fixed his eyes on her holographic window. It was a cheap job—a flat and unreal vista of the Rocky Mountains. The last batch of images he had downloaded pressed against the wall in his brain like a flood rising behind a dam. Which was imagination, he knew. The storage area that had been created to hold the raw data from the Net was isolated by a barrier of individually destroyed neurons rather than any kind of physical structure.

It still felt like a dam about to burst. He could open the floodgates. If he chose. And if he did—he might end up with no memory of any moment before this one. Who would he be, with no past? "I'm sorry." Ephraim turned his attention back to the lawyer. "I didn't mean to . . ." He broke off abruptly.

She wasn't listening to him. She was staring into space, her gaze unfocused, her posture alert and engaged. Her eyes moved so rapidly that her irises seemed to shiver, and her pupils had contracted to pinpoints. Like a sleeper in REM sleep, he thought. Like someone suffering a mild seizure. Sudden comprehension evoked the familiar ache in the muscles around his eyes. When you opened those floodgates—used your interface to its full capacity—the outside world ceased to exist. The brain sorted and filed the raw data you had downloaded directly from the Net, labeling it with sensory tags rather than words—so that you drowned in flashes of color and image, the sound of a tuba, a car starting, the scent of pancakes burning, or a whiff of garbage. He had videotaped himself in that state once.

It had frightened him. "*You* wear one," he rasped. "*Damn* it!"

She blinked, startled, regaining focus quickly. "Excuse me?"

"You're wearing an implant. NeuroTek?" He bolted to his feet, rage coursing through him. "What are you trying to pull here?"

"I'm trying to win a judgment for you," she said coldly. "Yes, I wear a NeuroTek implant. A lot of people do."

He felt . . . betrayed. There was no other word for it. "It's a conflict of interest." He glared at her. "How can you prosecute NeuroTek if you're happy with their product?"

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Her laugh caught him by surprise. "Mr. Polk, Ephraim, believe me, it was quite a shock to discover the nature of your suit. It was . . . disturbing." She closed her eyes briefly, and let out a breath that was almost but not quite a sigh. "You can fire me, if you seriously believe that my prosecution of your case will be influenced by my use of a similar implant." She shrugged. "At this point, it may be hard for you to find another good lawyer willing to handle this case." She stressed the "good" slightly, without the least hint of false modesty.

She was right about that, Ephraim thought moodily. Which didn't make him any happier. *Her* implant worked. He looked away, the words to end their relationship poised on the end of his tongue.

There was no time to find another lawyer.

She nodded briskly. "I need to take a look at what you do. I've never had much time to follow the art world, but you are quite the name."

"For the moment," he said between clenched teeth.

"If I am to convince a juror that you have lost something of value, I need to know what it is that's valuable. So tell me." She crossed her arms and perched on the corner of her desk. She seemed as much a stranger in this small space as he, Ephraim thought. This was not where she really worked.

"I do . . . newsmedia collages." He frowned, wondering how much she would understand—or care. "I start with a theme—an idea that's both intellectual and emotional. Then I search for images that—put together—convey that theme. Our news—what we think is worthy of attention—reflects our innermost self as a society." Images from *Children's Crusade* swept over him—half finished—and the stored download bulged against the invisible walls in his skull. "I sweep the media archives. I might sort through a million images to get the handful I need. It's like . . . a chord of music. Only I'm dealing with millions of notes, instead of a handful of octaves. I render the final collage as holographic images. I add music, scent, heat or cold. And when it's done, when it works, I am communicating to the person who stands on that stage beyond mere language. Words only skim the surface. This touches the soul. . . ." He broke off abruptly. He hadn't intended this outburst, couldn't read her expression at all. "People buy it." He shrugged

"That's why you had the implant done? Just so that you could access more images?"

"Just?" Incredulous, he stared at her. "*Just* so—yes!" He balled his hand into a fist. "It takes the *right* images to make it work—a lot of the right images. If I could, I'd search every archive in the Net. To make it work. Did you have a dog when you were a kid?"

She blinked at him. "Yes."

"Did you love it?"

Her expression was definitely wary now. "Yes, I did. I was very young."

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"I found a puppy when I was ten." He looked back at the fake view of the Rockies. "Someone had thrown it into a dumpster. It was tiny—its eyes barely open—way too young to be away from its mother. I fed it canned milk with an eyedropper, and woke up every hour so that it wouldn't get hungry. I wanted it to live. I had never wanted anything so much in my life. Later on, we had to give it away—we couldn't keep pets in our apartment. But that wasn't so bad. It was alive, and that's what mattered." He looked her in the face. "That week is part of what I put onstage. It's part of what makes it come together the way it does—the echo of that kid *wanting,* those silent hours when everyone else in the whole damn world was asleep, and he lay there waiting for the alarm, just him and that squirming bit of life. Cut out that memory—take it away, and . . . it loses something." *Children's Crusade.* He swallowed. "It is lessened," he whispered. "Shallow. Can you understand?" He got abruptly to his feet, needing to be out of this tiny office, away from this woman who would weigh his loss and maybe find it insufficient when weighed against *significant* cost. He was losing focus. The scene was unraveling into frayed and disconnected images. The implant was leaking again. If it was a bad episode, he might drool. "I'll show you what I do." He opened the door. "But not right now."

"Wait!"

Not in front of her. . . . He fled down the hall.

Erin stared at the closed door after he left, not reviewing the mass of information about his case now stored in her head or doing any of the other mental work she had to do before the trial began. The air circulation in her office was poor, and his scent still lingered; it was not unpleasant, she decided.

Was he more miffed about her having the implant or the fact that her office was so small and shabby? She looked around at the four little walls with the one holo view. No artwork or other decorations. None of the stacks of old lawbooks that most lawyers still kept as props to impress clients. She hadn't even bothered to get her degrees framed and hung up. This was a place even smaller and emptier than where she lived.

Too much time and money spent on loser cases. A good trial lawyer could make a living, have a nice office, maybe even real human staff—but you had to be selective to live off contingency cases. Erin had pushed herself hard enough, often enough, to know her weakness: she loved the pressure, the all-consuming intensity of trial too much. The tougher the case, the more that was true.

She had some other work—paying, transactional work that would at least help her to meet her overhead. But none of that would put her in trial on Monday. She would probably lose, and Polk would walk away blaming her; but not as much as she would blame herself. Then she

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would be despondent for a few weeks, until she managed to latch on to the next loser case, and go through it all again.

Polk seemed different from her other clients, though. He was guarded, wary, maybe not just of her; it was probably his nature. But a few times there, when he had talked about his work, and especially the puppy, she had caught glimpses of a great depth and power of being. An inner charisma? Maybe he was someone who could only open himself up to others under cover of his art. If so, that made it even more imperative that she see and comprehend what he did.

Erin shook her head. She had too much work to do to waste time in reverie, and a lot she needed to do with him. She decided to spend half an hour reviewing the medical files, to give him time to get home before calling. There was no unanimity about the how, but the medical authorities agreed that the NeuroTek interface was erasing or over-writing established connections between the billions of neurons in the brains of some users. In that intricate webwork was stored a person's memories from earliest childhood, memories that made up the very sense of self. Some users had been damaged to the point where they did not know who they were at all, would have to record messages to themselves before going to sleep every night. And a frequent secondary symptom, present in Ephraim's case, was occurrence of petit mal-like seizures, triggered by stress.

As she accessed this information, Erin realized that the same thing could be happening to her even now, insidiously, without her ever knowing until it was too late. But in her case, that might not be so great a tragedy. Some people never had a real childhood to lose. She could imagine worse things than forgetting the day one of the older kids had taken her street mutt away and killed it. . . .

The guarded expression was already in place when his face appeared on her phone monitor. She was right, then; it was habitual.

"Ephraim," she said, before he could speak, "I'll make you a deal. You won't run out on me like that again, and I won't run out on you. Okay?"

He wasn't going to agree to anything that simply, she saw.

"We have to go over your testimony," she began again.

"What's the point? You said I didn't have a chance."

"I didn't say that. I said it's going to be tough." She could not bring herself to tell him how tough. The class action had been abolished by statute two decades ago. Of the 163 individual NeuroTek lawsuits brought by mind-damaged users, seventy-eight had already been dismissed by summary judgment. This would be the tenth case to go to trial. NeuroTek had won the first nine. "We have to work really hard and hope for some luck. Everything depends on whether we can get a good juror.

"All that stuff I said to the judge about the credibility of expert witnesses . . . your expert isn't enough to win this for you. The thing that

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counts most is *your* testimony. We have to make that juror understand what this has done to you, make that person *feel* what you're going through."

"I went through all that with Derocher. When I gave the deposition."

"That was different—you were answering questions for NeuroTek's attorney. Here, you'll be talking to the person who's deciding the case. We have only a short, short time to present your testimony." It used to be that products liability cases were allowed weeks, even months of trial time, and that time-sanctions were not imposed for just a single improper question. She didn't tell him that, either.

"A damn program is going to judge me! What the hell is an AI going to care if I remember my first day of second grade? I can look facts *up*, right? I can access news clips. We need a human judge, not a computer."

"Blame the public," Erin told him. "People got tired of paying the increasing costs of the legal system. An AI doesn't require a staff, office, salary, healthcare, or retirement. And it isn't the judicial intelligence that will decide here, Ephraim. It is our juror—our very *human* juror. Which is why we have to figure out what's really vital to tell and decide how you're going to tell it."

He wasn't even looking directly at her anymore. His face had lapsed into a glazed, lost expression that frightened her. At the same time, there was something compelling about those gray eyes. . . .

"Look, we don't have to talk about your art right now. Let's go over your background. When you started using the implant and when you first noticed problems. Then we'll talk about what kind of juror we should try to select. We don't have to do it in my office. You name the place, and I'll meet you there."

He named a coffee shop near his own neighborhood, and she went there and waited for two hours, and he never showed up. She went to his residence in a high-rent tower, but there was no answer and the door would not admit her. She took the elevator to the underground, walked two blocks, and caught the mag-lev to the stop nearest her own apartment.

Erin worked alone all weekend. She finished reading the medical records and stored them in what she pictured in her mind as an old-fashioned paper-file drawer. She colored that drawer red, then linked it to the remembered smell of antiseptic and the sound of an ambulance siren. She did the same with the product designs, marking that drawer blue, cross-linked with the smell of motor grease and the steady hum of heavy machinery. The defense experts' depositions and reports were colored black and linked to the bang and cordite smell of a gunshot. If she needed to find something fast, in the middle of a rapid cross-examination, she could access the files instantly by remembering the color, the smell, or the sound.

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She prepared her opening statement, then worked on the expert examinations and thought about what kind of juror they wanted: which age, sex, occupation, ethnic, and other characteristics might be more receptive to Ephraim's case. One more thing she needed to cover with Ephraim. She tried to call, wound up leaving messages. Her last message late Sunday night was abrupt.

"Ephraim, if you don't at least show up in court tomorrow morning, the judge will default you. And NeuroTek will win. Is that what you want?"

She must have been out of her mind to agree to represent an *artist*. Especially in a case like this, she thought, as she broke the connection. It was his choice—it wasn't her fault if he didn't show. But she didn't sleep well that night, even after she let herself go to bed, and when she walked into the courtroom in the morning, she didn't expect to see him.

But he was there, sitting at their little table and carefully looking away from her. Clark had come with two legal assistants, several cases of paper exhibits and records, and a laptop Netlink. Was he just an old-style lawyer—or had all these trials taught him something about his client's product?

Between the two counsel tables and the judge's bench was an empty space, maybe four by seven meters, flanked on one end by the jury box. Erin thought of that space as the arena—which it had once actually been, centuries before, in medieval England, when *trial* had meant trial by combat, and justice would be dispensed only through divine intervention. It might take some of that to salvage this one, Erin thought grimly.

She started to explain the juror selection process to Ephraim, but the judge appeared, opened the day's session, and brought in the jury pool, seating them in the twelve seats along the right-hand wall. The courthouse had been constructed almost fifty years ago, in the days when everyone had the right to a jury of twelve—before public concern about costs became the overriding tenet of the judicial system. After the selection process eliminated all but one from the jury pool, that single juror would sit alone among the eleven empty seats.

The jurors each gave their background information, then the two lawyers took turns asking them questions. Erin wanted to know if they or anyone close to them had ever been seriously injured. How about an injury to the mind? How did they think it would make them feel, if their memory was eroding, they were gradually losing their *self*? And if you were aware of it, and knew you were also losing the ability to do the work that was the most important thing in your life?

Clark wanted to know if they had read or watched any news reports of implant injuries. Did they know any implant users themselves? Were they aware of all the millions of users who had used the NeuroTek implant safely, for a number of years? Of how much some people relied on the implant to do their work or function more efficiently in today's society?

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"Ms. Mendel, I've noticed, is a user herself," Clark said, as if in afterthought. "If not NeuroTek, then one of our competitors' products."

Erin raised her head. Oh, no—he wasn't going to get away with that one! It meant little to ask the judge to tell the potential jurors to disregard Clark's statement. She had to make them understand that it was outrageous.

"Object! What counsel do or don't do themselves is totally irrelevant." She was on her feet and could feel her voice quivering. It was no pretense; she *was* angry—she had a well of anger to draw on that had been growing deeper all weekend, she realized. "What's worse, it's unfairly prejudicial to Mr. Polk." She touched her hand lightly to Ephraim's shoulder; she could feel him begin to flinch away and squeezed her fingers to stop him. "Your Honor, Mr. Clark knows full well that remark was improper."

"Sustained," the judge said. "The court finds that defense counsel's statement is a moderate violation of the rules of evidence. Defendant is sanctioned with removal of ten minutes' time from its opening statement."

As Erin regained her seat, she noticed that Ephraim was looking at her for the first time that morning.

One potential juror, an older woman, announced that anyone who would put something artificial in his head was assuming the risk of losing his mind. Erin convinced the judge there was legal cause for dismissal of this juror. Another juror had a brother who had been mind-damaged by an implant; a second admitted she could never be fair to a big corporation. Clark got them both dismissed, for cause. After that, three more potential jurors, who obviously did not want to sit through a three-day trial, claimed they could not be fair to a corporation either. The pool was thinning out rapidly.

It came time for Erin to exercise her first peremptory challenge. By tradition and court rule, each party had three such opportunities to dismiss a juror without legal cause, for any reason. It was each side's chance to narrow the pool down to the one juror who might be most favorable and receptive to that side.

There was no more important issue than the person who would decide the case. She didn't have the right to make the choice on her own; this was Ephraim's trial. She conferred with him, recommending challenge of a middle-aged male who had only given them a single, contemptuous glance during the entire proceeding. Ephraim agreed.

It was Clark's turn, and he bumped a young male college student. Erin and Ephraim agreed to dismiss the elderly man who had not seemed able to understand Erin's questions, and Clark challenged a young female hospital nurse.

Erin had one remaining challenge. There were two people left in the jury box, a man who was a senior partner in a large structural engineer-

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ing firm and a young woman who worked in a body ornamentation shop. The man's answers to both lawyers' questions had been deliberate, thoughtful. The woman had answered more spontaneously; she definitely seemed more malleable and subject to emotional appeal.

"We should dismiss him." Erin started to rise.

"No," Ephraim whispered back. "I want to dismiss *her*."

She stared at him, shook her head a minute distance. "You don't want him, believe me."

"Ms. Mendel?" the judge said.

"Yes," Ephraim said, "we do."

"I don't have time now to tell you what occupational categories, body language, and personality types can mean to your case. It's enough that he's an engineer—all he probably knows is how to think logically. And he's going to know it's hard to make anything safer without spending money." Ephraim was nodding his head as if he agreed.

"I think he'll make a good juror," he said as she started to rise. Then he looked directly at her, with those eyes that still showed no tint of blue to wash out the gray, even under the direct overhead lights. "Whose decision is this?"

She couldn't believe it. Consulting the client was usually just a formality; none had ever overridden her recommendation on a point of trial strategy like this.

"Ms. Mendel." The judge's voice had shifted to the severe edge, and Erin saw her hand move toward the spectacles. The situation was already absurd; if Erin had to watch those waving spectacles contort that face again, she might not be able to stop from laughing.

Erin swallowed, stood upright, and dismissed the young woman. Please, please, bump that man, she prayed, as the judge looked at Clark. If Clark did so, the judge would have to bring in more jurors. No one could be as bad as this guy.

"NeuroTek waives its last challenge, Your Honor. We're satisfied that Mr. Calendri is quite qualified to serve as the juror on this case."

I'll bet, Erin thought.

"Very well, we have a juror," the judge said. "It is now 11:37 A.M. We will adjourn for lunch, reconvene here at 1:00 P.M. Counsel will then give opening statements, and we will receive the testimony of plaintiff's expert, Dr. Singh."

At lunch in an underground cafeteria, Ephraim wanted to talk but Erin cut him off.

"I have to work on my opening and questions for that neurobiologist your last lawyer hired," she told him. "Believe me, we *will* talk at the end of the day."

"Why do you say it like that? 'Neurobiologist your last lawyer hired'? Derocher said Dr. Singh is a leading expert in his field."

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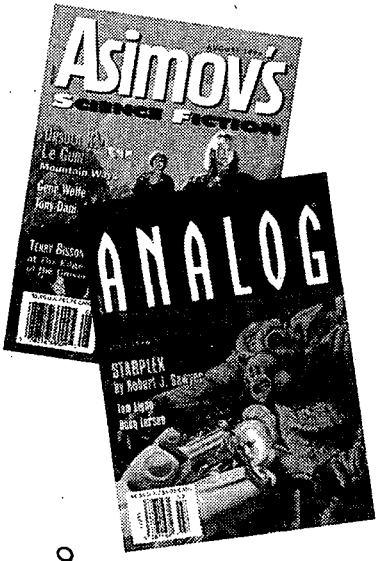

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"Maybe he is. But one, he's Indian, so he speaks English as a foreign language. Two, he's never, ever testified in court, and three, I tried to work with him yesterday and he's hopeless. I don't think he gave a straight answer to a single question. He's only any good to me—to us—if he can communicate his expertise to the juror."

She turned from her work and looked fully at him. "You have to understand something, Ephraim. Derocher only hired Singh to get an opinion that might convince NeuroTek to settle. When NeuroTek didn't blink, Derocher bailed out. A lawyer doesn't make money on a contingency case unless he wins or gets a settlement. Do you understand exactly what I'm telling you?"

They were silent, and she was immersing in her work again when he said, "He said I should take their offer."

"What?" Part of her attention came back to the table.

"Derocher. NeuroTek did offer to settle, but it wasn't much. And they wouldn't admit anything or agree to recall their product. I said no."

"You turned down a settlement offer on *this* case?"

He nodded, with no trace of apology. "I'm pretty well broke, trying to pay all my medical bills, but I really don't care about the money. Derocher once said that if NeuroTek ever loses just one of these cases, they would face unlimited liability because everyone else could use the defective product finding against them. So they'd have to settle with the other injured people and recall the implant to fix the interface. Is that true?"

"Yes, it probably is," she told him. "But let me get this straight. You won't settle for anything less than total victory—and you do just about everything possible to ensure that your lawyer can't win? That's wonderful."

He started to speak, but she raised her hand and turned back to her work. *Artists,* she thought. Never again.

At 1:02 P.M., Erin started her opening statement of the case from the counsel's podium, and she did not proceed far before she realized how inadequate it would be. This was her first and best opportunity to tell the juror Ephraim's story and she could not even begin it because she barely knew it herself. Oh, she could talk about the memory loss and the medical cause and the grim prognosis. But she couldn't talk about Ephraim or what the loss of himself really meant. Dr. Singh arrived and took his seat in the middle of her statement, and she was grateful for the interruption. She could tell the juror was too.

When his turn came, Clark talked about the law, the undisputed facts, then the law again. He reminded the juror that it would be his duty to follow the law, as the judge instructed.

Dr. Singh was a small, dark-complexioned man, whose eyes kept darting to the media representatives in the spectators' seats, as if they were a firing squad. He did speak English, of a sort. The court translation program only had to explain his testimony a few times, in an androgynous monotone.

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She tried to relax him by first covering his personal background, easy questions to start him talking; but he misstated both his marital status and the number of his children, correcting himself each time with profuse, stumbling apologies. She managed to pry out enough of his credentials to qualify him as an expert, but she had worse luck when she tried to elicit his key opinions. Again and again, she began over, rephrasing her questions; he would assume an air of authority and commence a lecture on some other point.

"Doctor," she finally tried, in desperation, "don't you believe that the wetware interface could have been designed to absolutely prevent any memory damage, without significantly increasing the product's cost?" She was sure this leading question would earn her a sanction from the court, once Clark objected. But he remained seated, clearly enjoying the spectacle the way it was unfolding.

Singh peered at her. She hadn't once managed to get him to look at the juror. "Of course, wetware interface can be designed in several ways, and, most unfortunately, I do not know how they all cost."

They were going in circles. She would never get him to express clearly the opinion that was needed to keep the judge from directing a verdict dismissing their case. The juror was watching with an amused expression, and the judge wouldn't allow this to go on any longer. She sat down.

Then Clark stood up for his cross-examination and—amazingly—saved them, from a directed verdict at least. He brought out a few minor points, showing that Dr. Singh was not board-certified in neurobiology in the U.S., how his views were in the minority of his field—and then asked the question he should never have asked.

"Just so it's clear to the juror, Dr. Singh, you're not actually saying that NeuroTek could have improved the safety of its implant at no additional significant cost, are you?"

Dr. Singh peered intently at Clark for a long moment. Erin felt her heart begin to seize up. Dr. Singh cleared his throat.

"No, that is not true."

Clark knew better than to continue, but he couldn't help himself. "You're saying NeuroTek *could* have made its product safer? Without a significant cost increase?"

"Yes. Of course, that depends on what means 'significant.' But—"

"Thank you, Doctor." Clark sat down before he did any more damage to his own case.

For a moment, Erin thought her sigh could be heard throughout the courtroom. She glanced quickly at the juror; he still wore an amused expression. He probably hadn't even listened to the most critical testimony for their case.

The judge ended the day, and after they left the courtroom and had

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passed through the gauntlet of media people, Ephraim asked, "How did it go today?"

She looked at him without breaking stride. He was rubbing his shoulder, where she had squeezed him. He wasn't stupid—he didn't have to ask. Only Clark's mistake had saved them from an outright dismissal. They had come in unprepared and wound up with the worst possible juror anyone could have imagined—a defense lawyer's dream.

And it was his fault.

She took his shoulder very deliberately, closing her hand—gently—on exactly the spot where she had gripped him before. "We are going to go to your studio," she said. "Right now. You are going to show me what you do with your implant, and what NeuroTek has cost you. Or there is very little point in continuing." He stiffened briefly, jaw tight, giving her a single brief glance from the corners of his eyes. Then he shrugged, his taut shoulders slumping.

"Give me an hour, okay?" A tiny muscle leaped along the side of his jaw. "I . . . I need some privacy, first."

She stopped, facing him in the middle of the crowded sidewalk, struggling with her anger. "Are you going to let me in this time?"

"Yes." Those clear gray eyes met hers without evasion. "This time I'll let you in." He turned on his heel and strode off down the street before she could stop him, never once looking back.

So he *had* been there, yesterday. Erin clenched her teeth. And now he was running away again. From what? Erin shook her head, wondering just how big a disaster this was going to be.

Slumped on one of his big floor cushions against the wall, Ephraim watched on the wall-mounted security screen as Erin rang his bell. Right on time. He glanced at his watch. One hour exactly. Anger stirred in his belly. This woman was pushy, demanding, *invasive*—utterly unlike Derocher. He was tempted to let her ring.

She wanted to win. Derocher had wanted the money. That's why he had dumped the case—he wasn't going to get paid. Ephraim wondered suddenly why winning mattered to her. He closed his eyes, his head bursting with the images he hadn't dared to download, tempted to say the hell with it, open the interface, and finish *Crusade*. If he did, and the imperfect interface failed entirely, he would have no memory anymore. *Crusade* would no longer matter.

Suicide, he thought. Suicide of the soul, or merely of the self?

The door chime sounded again, and he pushed himself abruptly to his feet. His chin was wet. He wiped his face on his sleeve in disgust. "Enter," he said, and watched her vanish from the camera eye as she marched into the building's entry. He met her at the door, noticed that she was still furious, although she was hiding it well.

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TECHNOLOGY UPDATE

Why pay for cellular phone service if you only want it for emergency use?

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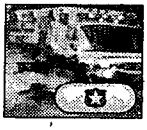

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"Thank you for letting me in," she said with some irony.

"I don't normally invite people into my studio." He leaned against the wall, watching her examine his small living space.

"This is a very expensive apartment complex," she remarked mildly. Her gaze took in the two floor cushions on the oriental rug and the low birchwood table, the efficient kitchen wall with its built-in microwave and beverage units. It wasn't much bigger than her office. "Real wood." She bent to stroke the satiny grain of the table top. "Very nice. The carpet is handwoven, isn't it?" She nodded appreciatively. "Other than that, this is a rather unpretentious room for this type of building."

"I like real textures." He wondered what she was getting at. "And I didn't choose the building for its prestige." He heard the defensive note in his voice and tried to stifle it. "It has state-of-the-art holographic and virtual capabilities built into it. I didn't have to retrofit my studio." He walked across the small room and palmed the studio door lock. "Would you . . . like some tea or something?" He wanted to delay this.

"No, thank you." She walked through the door, her eyes sweeping the barren studio. The holo-stage took up most of the floor. Circular, it rose a bare fifteen centimeters from the polished tiles, off-white, its surface as pristine as a new snowbank. The directional speakers and scent generators were hidden in its base. She glanced at it, then walked around it to the small shelf on the far wall to stare at the single yellow rose in its cut-glass vase. "You like flowers?"

He lifted the rose by its stem, a thorn pricking his thumb. "We have yet to create something this complex and fine from scratch." The thorn had drawn a tiny crimson bead of blood. He wiped it on his shirt and touched the delicate, creamy curve of a petal. "This keeps me humble." He replaced the rose in its vase and turned his back on her. "System, on," he said, and the room darkened. Light swirled and shifted above the stage, and he felt an illogical twinge of fear. "System, run *Fields*. Step up onto the stage," he said as the shimmering holographic mist took on color and shape. "The system is focused on a participant. You don't get the effect from outside." And he climbed onto the stage without waiting to see if she would follow suit. He had meant to explain it to her—what he had attempted to convey here, how he had sorted through images of old battlefields and new ones, trying to find the echoes of violence past and present, and its segue from life to death to life—to capture the dark frivolity of human conflict against the vast landscape of racial memory.

But the words dried up inside him as the images formed—green fields where long spring grass didn't quite hide the uniform crosses of military graves, overlaid with a young Asian man tossing a laughing child into the air, and a blonde girl giggling and wrestling with her lover, overlaid with a pool of drying blood beside a blooming dandelion. A sparrow pecked for crumbs among empty shell casings and crumpled candy wrappers. Build-

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ings fell in static glimpses. Overlaid one on top of the other within the holographic field, the images sharpened and faded at seeming random to create a collage that drew the eye and mind from the past to the present and back into the past in startling leaps. Bleached stones tumbled amid ancient burial mounds and Ephraim smelled frost and wet wool. Trucks and tanks rolled, scented with gasoline and a whiff of peppermint, scored by percussion and bass oboes. Children played hide-and-seek beneath a summer sky marked with the white calligraphy of fighter jets and scented with new-mown grass.

Life, death, and laughter, the images came faster and faster—almost too fast for the surface mind to register, speaking to a deeper place in the human consciousness. The whine of shells falling became bird song. Someone cried in pain, overlaid with the soft flute notes of a lullaby. Then the sensory whirlwind stilled suddenly and a child emerged from a shimmering waterfall, her eyes grave in her thin face. She melted into a West African soldier who flashed a white grin even as his flesh faded from his bones and his bones crumbled, polished into pearls by the flowing water. The dark-eyed girl shook water from her hair, scooped up the gems, and laughed, and her teeth gleamed with the iridescence of the pearls. Finally the images faded, leaving only the lingering scent of rain-wet pine needles and twilight.

The room lights came on.

Erin was standing very still in the center of the stage, her eyes fixed on the child's vanished image, her face utterly unreadable. For the space of a dozen heartbeats, she remained silent, then she turned slowly to face him. Her eyes were the color of the sea at sunset, shot through with hints of gold.

Ephraim found that he wanted to ask her what she had seen—if it was . . . significant. He didn't. And he realized that he was afraid to.

"Thank you." She looked away briefly, her profile stark against the bone-white of the blank walls. When she turned back to him, her manner was brisk and professional. "I'd like to see what you were working on when the implant began to leak."

"No!" The involuntary syllable burst from him. "I . . . it's not finished. I'd rather not."

"Ephraim." She touched his arm, and this time her touch was truly gentle. "I need to see it."

He looked down at her long fingers and swallowed, wanting desperately to say no. But winning this trial mattered to her—perhaps in the way *Crusade* mattered to him. "System," he whispered. "Run *Children's Crusade*."

He fled the stage and the studio. If he stayed, he would do it—download the stored images in his head—the ones that might make *Crusade* whole.

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Or destroy him.

After a long time, Erin came into the main room to stand over him where he huddled on a floor cushion. "I'll see you tomorrow," she said briskly. "I will be examining you on the stand. Just relax and answer my questions. And we need to show your art to Calendri. The courtroom has holo capability for receiving demonstrative evidence—though nothing as good as the stage you have here." If his work had meant anything to her, she was hiding it.

"Not *Crusade*," Ephraim whispered.

"Please be on time," was all she said. She left, closing the door gently behind her.

He had wanted her to say that she understood. He realized suddenly that he had wanted it a lot. Getting stiffly to his feet, he took down the bottle of very old Scotch from the cupboard above the microwave, and poured himself a generous shot. The whiskey burned its way into his stomach and he stared into the amber depths of the bottle, tempted to just keep on filling up the glass until it all went away.

Tomorrow would still come. He put the bottle back on its shelf and went to stand in front of his studio door. He didn't go in. The temptation would be too great.

On the mag-lev returning from Ephraim's apartment, Erin could not keep her hands still. They fluttered and hopped about her lap like a sparrow feeding on a battlefield. Or a rooster beating its wings as its throat was cut.

This guy was no fad—Ephraim Polk was for real. What kind of mind could sort through the cacophony of media sights, sounds, and smells that humanity deluged upon itself daily, and find a theme, an elegant order that was invisible to her and almost everyone else? That could distill out of that mass of mostly trite and vacuous raw material an art that was as true and powerful as anything she had ever seen, that had moved her like nothing else had for a long time?

If a lawyer could only find a way to move a *juror* like that. . . . That was what Ephraim needed, what he deserved. And what he didn't have.

She saw her station approaching and got up. The car slid smoothly and silently to a stop, and she walked the length of the platform to an intersection with an underground walkway, turning left to go to her office, instead of going home for the night. If Ephraim didn't have a lawyer who could move people as his own art did, at least the lawyer he had would work all night for him, to keep from losing his case.

But by the time she reached her office building, she wasn't thinking anymore about his art, or her own work, but of the sight of his steady gray eyes, the shy hesitancy in his voice, and the smell of his hair as she'd stood close to him while he talked about a yellow rose in his hand.

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* * *

Ephraim shifted on the hard wooden chair of the witness stand, watching Erin pace the empty space of floor that was really a stage, set for drama and tragedy. The juror watched, too, alone among empty chairs. Instead of diminishing him, the empty seats made him appear larger. Or maybe it was only his inner knowledge of how important this man was that made him seem large, Ephraim thought distractedly. Erin looked larger here, too—towering over him, although in reality she wasn't that much taller than he. Power, he thought. He had never addressed the many ways that men and women assumed power, both great and petty. And was the small power of a domineering lover any less important than the power of, say, a major player in the world market? It would have made a good subject, he thought bleakly.

"Will the plaintiff please answer the question?" The judge's voice managed to sound quite humanly severe. Ephraim started.

"I'm sorry." He had disconnected again. At least he wasn't drooling. Erin had to be furious behind her mask of patient tolerance. "I didn't mean to . . . will you repeat the question, please?"

"Mr. Polk?" Erin stepped to the railing, her nearness forcing him to look up at her. "You have described your art as a collage—a compilation of images gleaned from decades of media videos and even still photographs. Why did you purchase NeuroTek's implant?" She turned her gaze on their juror, although her words were still addressed to Ephraim. "Couldn't you access those images just as well through the Net?"

"I could, but I couldn't access as many," he said urgently. "I'm trying to create a glimpse of . . . our soul." Inadvertently, his eyes traveled to the nearest holo projection lens recessed in the ceiling overhead. "I'm searching for who we are as a race. I run through thousands of images and maybe *one* of them—a child's face in a certain light, a flower growing up through a crack in an asphalt parking lot—one of them gives me the note that I need. And I need a thousand of those moments—those notes—to create something that speaks to participants. Don't you see?" He leaned forward, willing her to hear him. "Each of us is so different, and I need to speak to everyone. The pieces wouldn't be as good. They wouldn't say . . . what they do."

"So you risked the implant because without it, your art would have been less than it is," she mused, turning again to the juror.

"Objection, leading," Clark said.

"Sustained," the judge said. "A minor violation. Ms. Mendel is docked five minutes from final argument."

"Why did you risk the implant, Mr. Polk?" Erin asked.

"It was . . . supposed to be safe." He had almost forgotten the juror. Calendri sat sternly upright on his uncomfortable chair, frowning as he listened. Erin hadn't wanted him. Ephraim couldn't remember anymore

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what had made him demand this man. That moment had fallen into the darkness that was eating him.

"How did you first realize that you were losing memory?"

"How? I . . . couldn't remember things." He blinked at her. "One day I was thinking about the . . . the apartment where I grew up. And I realized that I couldn't remember the name of the street. Or which city we lived in. It scared me." He drew a deep breath, reliving that terrible sense of *absence* and the panic that had seized him. "I spent all afternoon searching old records, but I don't . . . I mean, my mother died years ago, and I didn't have anything that told me what street we lived on, or what it was like. I remember the apartment. It was tiny. I remember her coming home late from her shift, but outside—the street, the buildings—it's a blank." He stopped for breath. Erin's eyes had unfocused for an instant, as if she were accessing her implant.

"What about your father?" She nodded encouragingly. "Did he ever take you outside?"

"I don't have . . . " He felt the blood draining from his face. "That's not true. I do have a father. I think I got mail from him when I had my first show . . . I think." He swallowed. "Is he . . . is he still alive?"

"Yes, Mr. Polk." Erin's eyes glazed again for an instant. "He lives in the Palm Springs Oasis. I'll be glad to give you his address after we're finished here."

"Thank you." Eprhraim stared at the old dark wood of the railing in front of him. "I wonder how he felt about that show? I can't remember that, either."

"Ephraim." It was the first time in her questioning that Erin had used his given name. She leaned against the railing, looking down at him, and her voice was coaxing. "Tell us about your work in progress. You call it *Children's Crusade,* don't you?"

"Yes." The word came out a whisper.

"Will the plaintiff please speak so that we can hear him?" the judge demanded.

"Yes," Ephraim said more loudly.

"What would happen to it when it was finished?"

"The Unwin Gallery in the New York Dome had contracted to show it." He relaxed a little. "They showed my last three works."

"Were they successful?"

"Yes." He wasn't sure where this was going. It wasn't a matter of money, he wanted to tell her, and sensed that their juror was getting restless. "I get a royalty every time someone participates in the piece. And they sell virtual copies. Although you don't get the same effect."

"So *Children's Crusade* would have made you a lot of money?"

"Probably." He shrugged.

"You speak as if you can't finish this piece."

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"I can't." He forced himself to speak up.

He thought she would ask him why—and he couldn't tell her. But she didn't ask; instead, she nodded, then looked up at the judge. "Your Honor, I would like to have the juror experience *Fields*—a piece that Mr. Polk finished prior to the malfunction of his implant. And then have him see the unfinished piece, *Children's Crusade*—if we may?"

"Yes," the judge said, "you may proceed."

"Run *Fields,*" Erin instructed the system.

The holographic projection was focused on the jury box, but from his adjacent witness chair the images looked only a little distorted, the sounds and scents barely out of sync. Calendri sat very still, his eyes flicking from here to there to follow the kaleidoscopic images. The piece ended. Almost imperceptibly, Calendri seemed to shrug.

"Now this is the piece that Mr. Polk is unable to finish," Erin went on doggedly. She had noticed that shrug, too, Ephraim thought bleakly. "You can compare them directly. System, run *Crusade.*"

There was nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. Ephraim watched, unable to stop himself. The images pierced him—children playing tag amidst the thornbrush huts of dying Africa, a girl with tawny skin and a round Asian face beneath a white headscarf carefully cutting the throat of a red and black rooster while its scarlet blood ran down her arm, a boy cradling a newborn kitten, two children peering through the glassless window of a ruined urban building, a young child fleeing through an open-air market with his arms full of stolen clothes. . . . The glimpses showered down around him like stinging rain, jagged and without power or cohesion. Flute and percussion notes whispered in his ears and a breath of icy air raised goosebumps on his skin. It didn't work with the rooster's bright feathers, and the thick, crimson blood.

"Thus we create ourselves eternally, in an innocence that evolves into good or evil, but is never lost," Ephraim whispered. Those were the notes in his working file. He reached for that description, felt for the soul of this piece. It was gone. Forever. In his brain, the stored images pressed against the walls of his skull, and the access code was *there,* so easy to invoke. Grief pierced him. Release them, he thought. Let the darkness eat it all, eat all that was left of him—water of Lethe. At least he would no longer care. He began to shape the code images.

"System, endit." Erin's words were close and loud in his ears. "Ephraim, *don't.*"

The anguish in her voice reached him. Ephraim let the code fade, and buried his face in his hands. The pressure of those images threatened to burst the walls of his skull, scatter shards of bone like shrapnel, and maybe it would be the best thing. "It isn't *finished.*" He pressed darkness into his eyes with the heels of his hands, wanting to blank those incomplete images forever. "I knew how it was supposed to work. I *knew* what I

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wanted. *I knew how to finish it.*" He drew a sobbing breath. "And now . . . it's gone. I don't know . . . what I meant to do here anymore." He raised his head slowly and met Calendri's impassive stare. "I just don't know."

"What don't you know, Ephraim?" Erin's quiet words prodded him mercilessly.

"Playing on the street, going to school." The words tore their way free. "It's gone. Wiped out. My father, and how he talked to me, how he felt when I passed an exam, or when I got hurt. Don't you understand?" He clutched the railing, his nails biting the wood. "Did I tell you about a puppy I had? I think I did, but I don't remember what I told you. You can remind me, but can you make it *part* of me again?" He closed his eyes briefly, his hands shaking. "How can I finish a piece about the child that we were and are? *I never was a child.*" He bowed over the smooth wood. "I am not even sure that I am human anymore," he whispered.

Silence filled the courtroom. And for nearly a minute, no one said anything.

"That's all I have, Mr. Polk," Erin said, and there was a roughness in her voice that he hadn't heard before. She turned to the judge. "Is it about time for lunch, Your Honor?"

"Yes," the judge said. "At 1:00 P.M. we will reconvene for Mr. Polk's cross-examination."

Slowly, Ephraim straightened, and his eyes met those of the juror. A brief emotion moved across the man's face, but it vanished too quickly for Ephraim to identify it. Pity, he thought bleakly. Pity for a loser. Then Erin's hand was on his arm and she was guiding him back to his seat.

"Just a few more questions, Mr. Polk." Clark studied his paper notes at the podium. Erin thought he would not keep Ephraim on the stand much longer. This was a case where every "I don't remember" answer only served to illustrate the loss.

"You wouldn't have been able to make your art without the implant. Isn't that true?"

"What?" Ephraim looked so exhausted and vulnerable. Erin had to restrain herself from leaping to her feet, rushing forward to interpose herself between Ephraim and his attacker. But any objection to questions that were entirely proper on cross-examination would only earn her a sanction from the judge.

Clark repeated his question, and Ephraim replied, "No. I still could have done it. When I still had my memories."

"But you couldn't have done it as efficiently? It would have taken a lot longer, right?"

"That's true."

"And your work might not have been as good?"

"Yes."

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"Now, you did receive a copy of NeuroTek's disclosure statement and product warnings before you had the device implanted, didn't you?"

Ephraim's face showed that lost, perplexed expression that had become to him almost as habitual as his guarded one. Once again, Erin found herself poised on the edge of her seat.

"Let me help," Clark went on quickly, displaying a document on the exhibit monitor. It was two pages long and had a lot of words. "I won't waste the court's time by reading this now. Mr. Calendri, I'm sure, is quite capable of reading it for himself. And the judge will instruct the juror that these warnings are legally sufficient under federal regulations. But to sum it up, this does reveal the risk of memory damage to certain users, doesn't it?"

"I guess . . . if that's what it says."

"And there, at the bottom of the second page, that's your signature, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is."

"Indicating that you had received this copy of the warnings, had read them, and understood them?"

"Yes."

"Thank you. I have nothing more." Ephraim's face showed relief as he came down from the stand. Funny, Erin didn't have any trouble reading his expressions anymore.

"Is that it for me?" he whispered, as soon as he sat at their table.

"Yeah," she told him. "Now it's NeuroTek's turn."

Clark proceeded to call a progression of expert witnesses—a neurobiologist, a product safety warnings expert, an implant design expert, and a production cost analyst. By now they, along with Clark and his legal assistants, were a smoothly running litigation team. They had all been through this many times before, and each expert made his or her points quickly and clearly.

On cross, Erin brought out how much they were being paid by NeuroTek, how many times they had worked for that company before, how even the foundations or institutions that employed them were partly funded by NeuroTek. As she inquired, she scanned thousands of lines of their prior deposition and trial testimony, looking for any inconsistency she might use to undermine their credibility. But there were no major discrepancies, and explanations for the minor inconsistencies had all been ironed out in the previous NeuroTek trials.

"NeuroTek's commercials don't make any mention of the risk of memory loss, do they?" she asked the safety warnings expert. She displayed a series of holo images from the implant's advertising: a stockbroker calling up quotations by the second, students cramming for exams, a couple blissfully engaging in sex from hotel rooms in different cities, with none of the encumbering hardware.

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"No," the witness conceded.

"And these fine-print warnings didn't do much for a thousand other NeuroTek users who have been mind-damaged by the implant, did they?"

For the space of a heartbeat, the expert looked at her. Then he raised his eyebrows. Erin had gone too far; and in that strange, involuntary communion that sometimes forms between lawyer and hostile witness, they both knew it.

"Objection!" Clark shouted. "That's irrelevant and highly prejudicial!"

"Sustained." The judge looked at Erin, and the waving spectacles now did not make her face look funny, only grotesque. "Ms. Mendel, this is your second violation, and a serious one: that remark also violates the court's pretrial order. You are personally fined five thousand dollars, and the plaintiff is sanctioned with removal of your final rebuttal argument." The judge turned toward the juror. "You are instructed to disregard Ms. Mendel's remark. The only injury at issue in this case is the plaintiff's."

Then the judge adjourned for the day, and Ephraim looked at her, eyes open wide.

"It went a little better today," she said. "You did great. I'm the one who screwed up." He had actually done better than great. His testimony had been the most compelling she had ever seen from the witness stand. She could only hope that Calendri, the juror, had seen it the same way.

Erin closed her eyes. She hadn't slept more than three hours a night since taking this case. Today she had not done much, if anything, to shake NeuroTek's expert testimony. And she had lost one of the few plaintiff's advantages, the opportunity to address the juror last. Tomorrow would be her final chance.

Ephraim cleared his throat. She came back to awareness, realized they were still at their table, alone in the now-empty courtroom. How long had he been sitting there quietly beside her?

"I . . . didn't think you understood when you walked out yesterday," he said. "But you did. And you made me . . . say it. I didn't want to—at first I was angry. I'm not anymore."

"I think I do understand, Ephraim. The problem is I just don't know how to put it into words. Maybe if I tried what you do . . . scan all night, find the right images. . . ."

He was shaking his head, then smiled wryly. "A little late to be learning new tools." His smile faded. "If you hadn't stopped me out there . . . I would have evoked the interface." He paused, his eyes on her face. "You have everything you need," he said finally. "But it doesn't just come from here." He pointed to his head. "It comes from *here*, too." He touched her lightly, just below her collarbone, and that brief contact ran through her like an electrical current.

"Maybe so." She managed to smile. It would be nice to be able to talk to

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him about something beside this case. "This is my problem from here on. You should go home, get some rest. Tomorrow's a big day."

"I think we both should get some rest. No more working most of the night, okay?"

How had he known that? "Sure," she lied. "I'll go home and get some sleep."

Ephraim didn't go home. Instead, he rode the mag-lev out into the countryside beneath the darkening sky, getting off finally at a deserted ag platform far beyond the urban lights. The leaves of tall crop plants whispered in the night breeze beneath billions of stars. The green-scented darkness between the plants was the darkness that lurked inside his head, waiting to eat him. He summoned the access code images, and then, face turned to the stars, he banished them. Forever.

He had made a promise to Erin, in that moment on the stand when she had cried out to him to stop. He would go on. The stored data would leak slowly through the faulty interface, taking a birthday here, overwriting a moment of love or laughter or loss there, until it was all gone. Then, the process would end. He would be left with whatever scraps of yesterday remained. Enough to know how much he had lost.

He wondered if he would remember Erin.

The lights of the city-bound mag-lev appeared on the horizon, sliding across the flat land toward him. It was time to go back, if he was going to be in court on time. Ephraim turned his back on the beckoning darkness and trudged back to the platform.

Erin closed her eyes and went somewhere else. In bed, sleeping gloriously late, in a cabin somewhere in the countryside with real windows. The sun is shining outside and quail are calling and a slight breeze lifts the drapes. The breeze carries the faint scents of wildflowers and pine needles, and from beside her comes the smell of a man and recent sex, how a certain man might smell after sex. Ephraim . . .

She raised her head, opened her eyes, and checked the time: 12:47 P.M. She had no time for fantasy. Her chin was wet, there was a sour taste in her mouth, and it was not wildflowers nor pine needles nor man-scent she smelled, but vomit. She flushed the toilet and went to the sink, wiped off her face, rinsed her mouth. She hadn't thrown up like that for years, not since right before her first trial.

God, she was a mess! A good thing she kept her hair so short; long hair hanging into the toilet bowl while you're puking your guts out could really spoil the appearance. She checked: 12:52.

The testimony of NeuroTek's last two experts that morning had gone no better for Ephraim than the day before. Afterward, they had gone to lunch; she had just lost what little she had been able to eat. And now, in

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five minutes, she had to go in and give the final argument she was nowhere near good enough to give.

Erin wanted nothing so much as to run—down the hall, into the elevator, out of the building. They couldn't catch her and *make* her come back to do this. But Ephraim would be left sitting in that courtroom by himself.

12:58. She had to go now. She walked into the courtroom and when the judge called her name she got up and stumbled to the podium, leaned on it for support. They were all waiting for her to speak—the juror, the judge, Clark, the media reps, a million viewers, Ephraim. Why would any sane person put herself through this? It was, like his art, nothing but an act of blind and unreasoning courage, like diving from a cliff into a dark, unfathomable sea. And all she had were her words.

It comes from *here*, Ephraim had said. *What* does? Then in her mind she heard another voice saying, "How do you feel, Erin?"

It was a question she had asked many, many times of others—jurors, clients, witnesses—"how do you feel about. . . ?" Now someone was asking her, in a man's voice that was not Ephraim's. "How do *you* feel, Erin?" A flash of memory . . . years ago . . . sitting across a restaurant table, her answer coming to her lips even before that man who had been her lover finished his question. "It doesn't matter." He had walked out of her life two days later.

She looked up from the podium and tried to start again. Calendri was watching her with an amused, slightly quizzical expression. The vidcams in the back of the courtroom rolled on; she was making a fool of herself in front of millions of viewers. Letting Ephraim down.

It comes from *here* . . . and yes, she could feel something building with tremendous pressure in her chest, pushing up at her throat. There must be a deep well inside her, she realized. She had thought it had gone dry long ago, and then she had backfilled it in with rock and debris. But the cavity was still there, under the surface, and it had grown so full that it was about to burst. It was pressing on her all around from the inside, and now it had to go somewhere. . . .

"The truth is, I'm standing up here scared to death."

Who said that? Was that her voice? What was she doing?—this was no way to start a final argument.

"I'm so scared, Mr. Calendri, because I'm not the kind of lawyer Ephraim Polk needs. The kind he deserves. Because there are only a handful of lawyers in the whole country who might be good enough to stand up to NeuroTek and all its lawyers and experts and other resources. And I'm not one of them. But I'm all he has."

The words seemed nonsense, drivel. Yet somehow, in speaking, she found the strength to stand upright and step back from the podium.

"And I'm scared of the law—that you might think that the law requires that you let a corporation escape liability for the injury it caused. That

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Mr. Clark might convince you that the law says it's impossible for Ephraim Polk to win against NeuroTek, Incorporated. But the truth is, the law says it's up to *you* to decide if NeuroTek's implant is defective."

As she spoke she walked slowly around the podium to the center of the courtroom, into the arena itself, where she had nowhere to hide and carried no arms but her speech and gestures. She stopped two meters from the jury box and looked Calendri in the eye.

She wanted to tell the juror how she had at first been angry about this case, because it seemed impossible, and at Ephraim. Tell him how she had grown up without parents, surviving on the streets in an urban kidpack; how fear had been so much a part of daily existence that she learned to survive by converting fear into anger. So that anger became the substitute, the crutch, for every other strong emotion. Until she had met a certain man, a client. But if she said those things, Clark might well object that her own experience and feelings about her client were not relevant, and the traditional leeway given to lawyers in final argument might not be enough to prevent the judge from sanctioning her again.

So she could only draw upon her old experience and new knowledge of her feelings to talk about Ephraim. Through his testimony, Ephraim had done that himself, far better than she could do. So she told how Ephraim's art had affected others, how he had, through his images and his own unfailing courage and honesty, brought out the true emotions that lay inside every human and which we could all share. She talked about the tragic, unfulfilled promise of *Children's Crusade,* how that work above all could have cut directly to the heart of each human being's past.

And so she tried to make the juror see how the loss of a person's past, the story of who that man really was, affected not only him, but the people who knew him. And in so doing, she made him not merely Ephraim Polk, famous artist, but Everyman.

Time passed without her noticing. The words came to her mouth as if they had sorted themselves; she had no sense of selecting them or arranging them into sentences. They only *came*—and they seemed to be the right words, and true. And when she again looked at Calendri, he was following these words. She had his full attention. Perhaps he even looked spellbound.

But her allotted time was almost up, and this was not enough. She could not ask for his verdict out of sympathy. Sympathy was the final appeal of the truly desperate. Ephraim deserved better, and this juror would need a rationale for finding the implant defective. He was, after all, an engineer. His emotions might move him toward a decision, but he would only make that decision if he felt good about it intellectually, as well as emotionally. He would want to feel good about it himself, and in the deliberation room he would also think about whether he could ex-

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plain his verdict to friends and colleagues. So she would have to offer a rationale—even if it was not as solid as the NeuroTek rationale, with all those experts and the law standing behind it.

She realized all this instinctively, without consciously working it out, within the space of a pause that lasted no more than a second. She also sensed that whatever instinct or . . . feeling had led Ephraim to choose this man, Calendri might have at least one thing they needed to win this case: strength, perhaps even courage, of his own.

"Mr. Clark has made a big point out of NeuroTek's product warnings, how Mr. Polk signed the disclosure. Ephraim did sign up for a NeuroTek implant, but does that mean he signed up for memory loss? That he agreed to trade the core of himself away, for a few years of doing his art more efficiently?

"NeuroTek's counsel also suggested—improperly, as the judge said—that I use an implant. Well, let's be honest: I do, and it's NeuroTek's, all right." She was taking a risk here, but gambled that Clark wouldn't have the nerve to object, after having opened the door on the subject himself. "I obtained an implant because I thought it would help me try cases better—and I, a lawyer, signed one of those disclosures too. Unless you sign, they won't give you one of these magic implants they advertise, that will make your whole life better. And you think, those injuries are rare, bizarre accidents. It won't happen to *you*."

Let the juror draw his own conclusions why Clark had not signed up for an implant himself.

"So what NeuroTek has done, you see, instead of making a safer product, they've tried to insulate themselves with a scrap of paper. It wouldn't have cost much to eliminate the risk of memory loss to users. But it costs them almost nothing to circulate a disclosure."

There—this was the right track to take with this juror. Now, if she could find a finish that blended the emotion and the reason. And the words came:

"NeuroTek's experts claim that it would take a 'significant' amount of money to produce an implant that didn't cause these memory injuries. But the key testimony came from Dr. Singh, when Mr. Clark asked him, and he said, yes, but that depends on how you define 'significant.' The judge will give you legal definitions of 'significant.' It's come to the point where we rely on a judicial program to tell us our law. But the law only defines the word in abstract terms. It's up to *you* to decide whether the amount of money NeuroTek talks about is *significant* in comparison to the cost of the story of a human life."

Erin did not tell the juror to ignore the law. If she tried to do that, the judge would cut her off, make her sit down—tell Calendri to disregard her argument. So she had to make the juror understand his own power by inference.

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"At least that's one point we haven't passed yet. At least we don't trust that program over there to dispense *justice*. Dispensing justice has always been an awesome responsibility, but, back in the days when we had juries of twelve, it was at least not such a lonely one. That responsibility now rests on you and you alone, Mr. Calendri."

Her time was almost up; less than a minute left.

"Ephraim Polk doesn't want your sympathy. We ask you for justice. And since justice is never served by the weak or the cowardly, it will take courage for you to do justice, all by yourself. It will require you to show as much courage as Ephraim Polk showed on the stand here yesterday. Maybe more."

Then Erin was done. She took her seat, utterly drained. The courtroom remained silent for what seemed hours. Finally, Erin glanced up at the juror. He was not looking at her or Ephraim, he was staring at the wall behind the judge's image. She looked at Clark, who was immobile, reading the papers in front of him. There was no sound from the media people behind her either, not the usual rustle of clothing or rattle of equipment.

Why wasn't anyone looking at her? Were they all embarrassed for her? Had she made that much of a fool of herself?

"Interesting summation," the judge finally said. She had removed her spectacles and held them in front of her chin, which only seemed to pull her features into an expression of thoughtful repose. "I have never before had counsel refer to me as 'that program over there.' It may border on disrespect for the court, but I cannot find any precedent that holds it improper. And it cannot be said that your words were untrue."

Erin thought the judge's own comment was unprecedented, at least in her experience. The judge's visage turned from Erin to Clark. "Very well, then. Mr. Clark, you may proceed."

Clark commenced his own summation from the podium in a steady, wooden voice; she knew he would talk about the law and interface designs and relative costs, but Erin could not follow his words. She noted only that as Clark proceeded, his voice and gestures gained conviction, and that Calendri seemed to be following the defense argument with close attention.

I am finished, Erin thought. There is nothing more I can do. It was not enough. Yet, it was all I had. And I don't know if I can ever do *that* again.

She looked at Ephraim, who was paying no attention to Clark, only watching her. Their eyes connected and she could feel the well start to fill again.

I know I could never do that again, by myself.

"I'll have to go visit him after this is over. My father. I . . . I want to know what he thinks of me. Who we were—father and son." Ephraim spoke to the cup of tea in front of him, noticing with one part of his mind

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the tiny hairline fractures that had begun to craze the white ceramic. Across the table, Erin remained silent, toying with one of the small fruit-filled muffins that the waitress had served with their tea.

She believed they had lost. Derocher had been right to drop his case. Ephraim turned his cup slowly on its saucer, watching her surreptitiously. Her face had taken on a gaunt quality, as if she had lost weight in the last forty-eight hours. She looked exhausted and . . . beautiful. Last night's sadness pierced him and he covered the moment by sipping at his cooling tea. In an hour, maybe less, it would be over, one way or another. Success or failure, she would put this trial behind her and go on to the next case. She would forget him. He would forget her.

He didn't want to forget her.

"I thought lawyers played tricks with words and laws." His words limped, rough and halting. "I thought that was all . . . there was to it. I didn't realize . . . what you could do. You made Calendri hear it, I think—what it means to me. You made him understand." He spread his hands, shaken by a sudden sense of impending loss. "Whether the decision goes for us or against us, it was . . . art. I just want you to know that."

She looked up, finally, her sea-colored eyes flecked with gold in the light from the window, a similar sadness shadowing her face. "Thank you," she said. "Whatever happens this afternoon, don't stop creating your collages. No, wait." She leaned forward to lay two fingers against his lips, stilling the denial he had been about to utter. "Even if you have no past, you are still human. You still have a soul. You told me about raising that puppy the day you came to my office—how much it mattered to you that it live. What you said moved me, in a way I . . . don't usually let myself be moved." A faint blush tinged her pale cheeks and she shook her head. "That passion is still part of you, Ephraim. You still have your vision and your drive to make it live. You simply see things from a different perspective than before. I know this," she said urgently. "Your strength is still there, even if you have to use fewer images. Trust yourself, Ephraim."

She took her hand away abruptly, her pupils contracting, eyes fixing on the wall behind him. "It's time to go back. The judge says the juror has reached a verdict." She held out her hand with a wan smile. "Wish us luck. We sure did our best."

He took it, trapped by the formality of dishes, and table linens, and the other diners. "Thanks," he said hoarsely. "Win or lose . . . thank you."

They got to their feet in unison and filed between the tables, barely noticed by the incurious diners.

Word had spread that a verdict was being returned, and Erin and Ephraim had to shove through an even larger crowd of media people at the courtroom door. They took their places in silence before the bench. Clark was already in his seat, managing to look triumphant in spite of

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his businesslike demeanor. Ephraim stifled a brief anger against the man who wouldn't take any risks himself but was willing to defend the companies that took advantage of those who would. The judge was waiting for them to be seated, peering over her old-fashioned glasses. "That program," Erin had called her. Remembering her defense of the AI system in her office, Ephraim stifled a smile. The judge raised her eyebrows at Ephraim and cleared her throat.

"Counsel for both parties are present, and we are back on record in the matter of *Polk v. NeuroTek, Inc.*" She called in the juror, and everyone waited for Calendri to resume his seat.

"Have you reached a verdict?" the judge asked.

Calendri's expression remained serious and unreadable. Ephraim had meant to watch him as Erin delivered her final argument, but her words had caught him up and he had forgotten Calendri entirely.

Ephraim found himself holding his breath. If they lost—it would be Erin's failure. She would never let it be anything else. That smug bastard Clark would smile at her, and that smile would pierce something vital inside her—maybe cripple it forever. For one brief moment, he wished he had taken Derocher's advice and settled out of court. Wanting to take her hand, Ephraim scrubbed his sweaty palms on his thighs instead. Calendri stood slowly and deliberately and faced the judge, not immune to the drama of the moment.

"Yes, Your Honor," Calendri replied. With his notepad, he uploaded his verdict to the judge.

The judge seemed to study it for an eternity before speaking. "The verdict is in proper form. I will now publish it: 'I, Peter G. Calendri, the juror duly empowered to decide this case, make the following verdict on the issue submitted to me.'"

Ephraim glanced at Erin; she had her eyes closed and head bowed.

"Question: 'Was the NeuroTek cerebral implant defectively designed or manufactured?' Answer: 'Yes.' Is that your verdict, Mr. Calendri?"

"Yes, it is," Calendri said, without a trace of uncertainty.

Defective. For a moment, no one seemed to understand. Then the hiss of indrawn breath sounded from behind and all around Ephraim, as if the courtroom itself were sighing. And it hit him—they had won! *Erin* had won. At his table, Clark made a sudden sharp gesture, his face briefly darkening. Erin let her breath out in a tiny, nearly inaudible sigh as a buzz of conversation filled the back of the courtroom. From the bench, the judge continued, using her severe tone for silence.

"Causation and injury having been stipulated by the defendant, final judgment is hereby awarded in the amount of plaintiff's stipulated and statutory damages for medical expenses, lost income, and pain and suffering. Proceedings are now concluded."

Ephraim barely heard her. "You did it!" He flung his arms around

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Erin, grinning at her startled expression. "*You* won this, because you made him listen beyond the mere words." And he kissed her. Hard. For real.

For an instant, she stood stiffly in his embrace, then, suddenly, her posture softened, and she was kissing him back. That knot of sadness in his gut rose up inside Ephraim like a wave, bittersweet and piercing. And he hid it. It would be unfair to her to let her see it.

Someone cleared their throat behind them, and Ephraim released Erin, his face heating. "I'm sorry," he said. She was smiling faintly, but it was a crooked, almost pained smile.

"I wanted to shake your hand." Calendri was standing there, a slightly amused expression on his face. "I don't care much about art, but I've worked hard all my life, and I make a good living. I've taken a lot of chances to get where I am." He nodded. "If you're willing to risk yourself for what you believe in, you don't need somebody stacking the deck against you." Calendri shrugged. "I had trouble following Dr. Singh's testimony the first time, but I've worked with enough scientists to know that a lot of good ones can't communicate worth a damn. So in the deliberation room I reviewed the court recordings a couple of times, and finally decided he knows his stuff better than those experts hired by NeuroTek." He held out his hand. "Good luck. I hope you make out okay."

"Thank you." Ephraim returned the man's firm grip.

Calendri nodded again, turned on his heel, and strode briskly up the aisle.

"Congratulations, Counselor." Clark paused on his way out of the courtroom, briefcase under one arm, assistants lined up behind him, and his mouth twitching as he spoke. "Though I doubt that verdict will stand on appeal."

Ephraim decided that comment had really been aimed at him, and it sounded none too confident. "Why not?" Ephraim met his eyes. "I have the best lawyer."

Clark grunted, shrugged, and marched up the aisle. The courtroom was empty now, except for the two of them. The judge's image had vanished. Erin was looking at him oddly, and he felt himself blushing again. "I'm sorry," he said again. Lamely. "What about their appeal? What do we do now?"

"I don't think NeuroTek has a chance. The judge didn't make any legal errors, and the appellate courts are doing all they can to protect what's left of the jury system." She looked away, her eyes focused on the empty bench. "I can refer you to a colleague of mine. She's a marvelous appellate lawyer. She'll . . ."

"Wait a minute!" He seized her arm, felt her flinch. "You're quitting? Why?" His sudden anguish roughened his voice. "I didn't mean to get so . . . physical just now, if that's the trouble."

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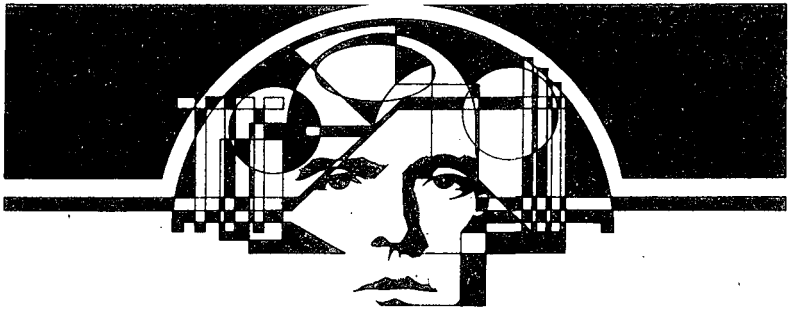
"That's not the trouble." She smiled crookedly, still refusing to look at him. "I let myself . . . get emotionally involved. I'm . . . not objective anymore. I just can't continue to represent you."

Not objective anymore. He looked down at his hand on her arm, pulled her gently around to face him. "What are you saying?" he asked softly.

"I . . ."

"No, forget it. Don't say anything." He laid his fingers on her lips, grinning like an idiot. "Words don't mean anything. Not yet, anyway." Then he took her face between his hands and kissed her again. Slowly.

And felt her smile. ●



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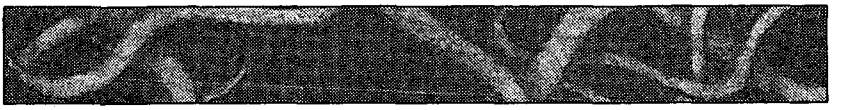

James Alan Gardner

THREE HEARINGS ON THE EXISTENCE OF SNAKES IN THE HUMAN BLOODSTREAM

James Alan Gardner lives in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, with his wife Linda Carson. He has published numerous pieces of short fiction in such places as *Amazing, F&SF, OnSpec,* and *Tesseracts.* In his spare time he plays piano, practices kung fu, and recovers from bruises. The following tale is his first for *Asimov's.*

Illustrations by Steve Cavallo

1. Concerning an Arrangement of Lenses, So Fashioned as to Magnify the View of Divers Animalcules, Too Tiny to be Seen with the Unaided Eye:

His Holiness, Supreme Patriarch Septus XXIV, was an expert on chains.

By holy law, chains were required on every defendant brought to the Court Immaculate. However, my Lord the Jailer could exercise great latitude in choosing which chains went on which prisoners. A man possessed of a healthy fortune might buy his way into nothing more than a gold link necklace looped loosely around his throat; a beautiful woman might visit the Jailer privately in his chambers and emerge with thin and glittering silver bracelets—chains, yes, but as delicate as thread. If, on the other hand, the accused could offer neither riches nor position nor

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generous physical charms . . . well then, the prison had an ample supply of leg-irons, manacles, and other such fetters, designed to show these vermin the grim weight of God's justice.

The man currently standing before Patriarch Septus occupied a seldom-seen middle ground in the quantity of restraints: two solid handcuffs joined by an iron chain of business-like gauge, strong enough that the prisoner had no chance of breaking free, but not so heavy as to strain the man's shoulders to the point of pain. Clearly, my Lord the Jailer had decided on a cautious approach to this particular case; and Séptus wondered what that meant. Perhaps the accused was nobody himself but had sufficient connections to rule out unwarranted indignities . . . a sculptor or musician, for example, who had won favor with a few great households in the city. The man certainly had an artistic look—fierce eyes in an impractical face, the sort of high-strung temperament who could express passion but not use it.

"Be it known to the court," cried the First Attendant, "here stands one Anton Leeuwenhoek, a natural philosopher who is accused of heresy against God and Our Lady, the Unbetombed Virgin. Kneel, Supplicant, and pray with his Holiness, that this day shall see justice."

Septus waited to see what Leeuwenhoek would do. When thieves and murderers came before the court, they dropped to their knees immediately, making gaudy show of begging God to prove their innocence. A heretic, however, might spit defiance or hurl curses at the Patriarchal throne—not a good way to win mercy, but then, many heretics came to this chamber intent on their own martyrdom. Leeuwenhoek had the eyes of such a fanatic, but apparently not the convictions; without so much as a grimace, he got to his knees and bowed his head. The Patriarch quickly closed his own eyes and intoned the words he had recited five times previously this morning: "God grant me the wisdom to perceive the truth. Blessed Virgin, grant me the judgment to serve out meet justice. Let us all act this day to the greater glory of Thy Divine Union. Amen."

Amens sounded around the chamber: attendants and advocates following the form. Septus glanced sideways toward Satan's Watchboy, an ominous title for a cheerfully freckle-faced youth, the one person here excused from closing his eyes during the prayer. The Watchboy nodded twice, indicating that Leeuwenhoek had maintained a proper attitude of prayer and said Amen with everyone else. Good—this had just become a valid trial, and anything that happened from this point on had the strength of heavenly authority.

"My Lord Prosecutor," Septus said, "state the charges."

The prosecutor bowed as deeply as his well-rounded girth allowed, perspiration already beading on his powdered forehead. It was not a hot day, early spring, nothing more . . . but Prosecutor ben Jacob was a man famous for the quantity of his sweat, a trait that usually bothered

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his legal adversaries more than himself. Many an opposing counsel had been distracted by the copious flow streaming down ben Jacob's face, thereby overlooking flaws in the prosecutor's arguments. One could always find flaws in ben Jacob's arguments, Septus knew—dear old Abraham was not overly clever. He was, however, honest, and could not conceive of winning personal advancement at the expense of those he prosecuted; therefore, the Patriarch had never dismissed the man from his position.

"Your Holiness," ben Jacob said, "this case concerns claims against the Doctrine of the, uhh . . . Sleeping Snake."

"Ah." Septus glanced over at Leeuwenhoek. "My son, do you truly deny God's doctrine?"

The man shrugged. "I have disproved the doctrine. Therefore, it can hardly be God's."

Several attendants gasped loudly. They perceived it as part of their job to show horror at every sacrilege. The same attendants tended to whisper and make jokes during the descriptions of true horrors: murders, rapes, maimings. "The spectators will remain silent," Septus said wearily. He had recited those words five times this morning too. "My Lord Prosecutor, will you please read the text?"

"Ummm . . . the text, yes, the text."

Septus maintained his composure while ben Jacob shuffled through papers and parchments looking for what he needed. It was, of course, standard procedure to read any passages of scripture that a heretic denied, just to make sure there was no misunderstanding. It was also standard procedure for ben Jacob to misplace his copy of the relevant text in a pile of other documents. With any other prosecutor, this might be some kind of strategy; with ben Jacob, it was simply disorganization.

"Here we are, yes, here we are," he said at last, producing a dog-eared page with a smear of grease clearly visible along one edge. "Gospel of Susannah, chapter twenty-three, first verse." Ben Jacob paused while the two Verification Attendants found the passage in their own scripture books. They would follow silently as he read the text aloud, ready to catch any slips of the tongue that deviated from the holy word. When the attendants were ready, ben Jacob cleared his throat and read:

After the procession ended, they withdrew to a garden outside the walls of Jerusalem. And in the evening, it happened that Matthias beheld a serpent there, hidden by weeds. He therefore took up a stone that he might crush the beast; but Mary stayed his hand, saying, "There is no danger, for look, the beast sleeps."

"Teacher," Matthias answered, "it will not sleep forever."

"Verily," said Mary, "I promise it will sleep till dawn; and when the dawn comes, we will leave this place and all the serpents that it holds."

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Yet still, Matthias kept hold of the stone and gazed upon the serpent with fear.

"O ye of little faith," said Mary to Matthias, "why do you concern yourself with the sleeping creature before you, when you are blind to the serpents in your own heart? For I tell you, each drop of your blood courses with a legion of serpents, and so it is for every Child of Dust. You are all poisoned with black venoms, poisoned unto death. But if you believe in me, I will sing those serpents to sleep; then will they slumber in peace until you leave this flesh behind, entering into the dawn of God's new day."

Ben Jacob lowered his page and looked to the Verifiers for their confirmation. The Patriarch turned in their direction too, but he didn't need their nods to tell him the scripture had been read correctly. Septus knew the passage by heart; it was one of the fundamental texts of Mother Church, the Virgin's promise of salvation. It was also one of the most popular texts for heretics to challenge. The presumption of original sin, of damnation being inherent in human flesh . . . that was anathema to many a fiery young soul. *What kind of God,* they asked, *would damn an infant to hell merely for being born?* It was a good question, its answer still the subject of much subtle debate; but the Virgin's words were unequivocal, whether or not theologians had reasoned out all the implications.

"Anton Leeuwenhoek," Septus said, "you have heard the verified word of scripture. Do you deny its truth?"

Leeuwenhoek stared directly back. "I must," he answered. "I have examined human blood in meticulous detail. It contains no serpents."

The toadies in the courtroom had their mouths open, ready to gasp again at sacrilege; but even they could hear the man was not speaking in deliberate blasphemy. He seemed to be stating . . . a fact.

How odd.

Septus straightened slightly in the Patriarchal throne. This had the prospect of more interest than the usual heresy trial. "You understand," he said to Leeuwenhoek, "this passage is about original sin. The Blessed Virgin states that all human beings are poisoned with sin and can only be redeemed through her."

"On the contrary, Your Holiness." Leeuwenhoek's voice was sharp. "The passage states there are snakes in human blood. I know there are not."

"The snakes are merely . . ." Septus stopped himself in time. He had been on the verge of saying the snakes were merely a metaphor; but this was a public trial, and any pronouncements he made would have the force of law. To declare that any part of scripture was not the literal truth . . . no Patriarch had ever done so in open forum, and Septus did not intend to be the first.

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"Let us be clear on this point," Septus said to Leeuwenhoek. "Do you deny the Doctrine of Original Sin?"

"No—I could never make heads or tails of theology. What I understand is blood; and there are no snakes in it."

One of the toadies ventured a small gasp of horror, but even a deaf man could have told the sound was forced.

Prosecutor ben Jacob, trying to be helpful, said, "You must appreciate that the snakes would be very, very small."

"That's just it," Leeuwenhoek answered with sudden enthusiasm. "I have created a device that makes it possible to view tiny things as if they were much larger." He turned quickly toward Septus. "Your Holiness is familiar with the telescope? The device for viewing objects at long distances?"

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The Patriarch nodded in spite of himself.

"My device," Leeuwenhoek said, "functions on a similar principle—an arrangement of lenses that amplify one's vision to reveal things too small to see with the naked eye. I have examined blood in every particular; and while it contains numerous minute animalcules I cannot identify, I swear to the court there are no snakes. Sleeping or otherwise."

"Mm." Septus took a moment to fold his hands on the bench in front of him. When he spoke, he did not meet the prisoner's eyes. "It is well-known that snakes are adept at hiding, are they not? Surely it is possible that a snake could be concealed behind . . . behind these other minute animalcules you mention."

"A legion of serpents," Leeuwenhoek said stubbornly. "That's what the text said. A legion of serpents in every drop of blood. Surely they couldn't *all* find a place to hide; and I have spent hundreds of hours searching, Your Holiness. Days and weeks and months."

"Mm."

Troublesome to admit, Septus didn't doubt the man. The Patriarch had scanned the skies with an excellent telescope, and had seen a universe of unexpected wonders—mountains on the moon, hair on the sun, rings around the planet Cronus. He could well believe Leeuwenhoek's magnifier would reveal similar surprises . . . even if it didn't show serpents in the bloodstream. The serpents were merely a parable anyway; who could doubt it? Blessed Mary often spoke in poetic language that every educated person recognized as symbolic rather than factual.

Unfortunately, the church was not composed of educated persons. No matter how sophisticated the clergy might be, parishioners came from humbler stock. Snakes in the blood? If that's what Mary said, it must be true; and heaven help a Patriarch who took a less dogmatic stance. The bedrock of the church was Authority: ecclesiastic authority, scriptural authority. If Septus publicly allowed that some doctrines could be interpreted as mere symbolism—that a fundamental teaching was metaphor, not literal fact—well, all it took was a single hole in a wineskin for everything to leak out.

On the other hand, truth was truth. If there were no snakes, there were no snakes. God made the world and all the people in it; if the Creator chose to fashion human lifeblood a certain way, it was the duty of Mother Church to accept and praise Him for it. Clinging to a lie in order to preserve one's authority was worse than mere cowardice; it was the most damning blasphemy.

Septus looked at Leeuwenhoek, standing handcuffed in the dock. A living man with a living soul; and with one word, Septus could have him executed as a purveyor of falsehood.

But where did the falsehood truly lie?

"This case cannot be decided today," Septus announced. "Mother

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Church will investigate the claims of the accused to the fullest extent of her strength. We will build magnifier devices of our own, properly blessed to protect against Satan's interference." Septus fought back a smile at that; there were still some stuffy inquisitors who believed the devil distorted what one saw through any lens. "We shall see what is there and what is not."

Attendants nodded in agreement around the courtroom, just as they would nod if the sentence had been immediate acquittal or death. But ben Jacob said, "Your Holiness—perhaps it would be best if the court were to . . . to issue instructions that no other person build a magnification device until the church has ruled in this matter."

"On the contrary," Septus replied. "I think the church should make magnifiers available to all persons who ask. Let them see for themselves."

The Patriarch smiled, wondering if ben Jacob understood. A decree suppressing magnifiers would simply encourage dissidents to build them in secret; on the other hand, providing free access to such devices would bring the curious *into* the church, not drive them away. Anyway, the question would only interest the leisured class, those with time and energy to wonder about esoteric issues. The great bulk of the laity, farmers and miners and ostlers, would never hear of the offer. Even if they did, they would hardly care. Minute animalcules might be amusing curiosities, but they had nothing to do with a peasant's life.

Another pause for prayer and then Leeuwenhoek was escorted away to instruct church scholars in how to build his magnification device. The man seemed happy with the outcome—more than escaping a death sentence, he would now have the chance to show others what he'd seen. Septus had met many men like that: grown-up children, looking for colorful shells on the beach and touchingly grateful when someone else took an interest in their sandy little collections.

As for Leeuwenhoek's original magnifier—Septus had the device brought to his chambers when the court recessed at noon. Blood was easy to come by: one sharp jab from a pin and the Patriarch had his sample to examine. Eagerly he peered through the viewing lens, adjusting the focus in the same way as a telescope.

Animalcules. How remarkable.

Tiny, tiny animalcules . . . countless schools of them, swimming in his own blood. What wonders God had made! Creatures of different shapes and sizes, perhaps predators and prey, like the fishes that swam in the ocean.

And were there snakes? The question was almost irrelevant. And yet . . . very faintly, so close to invisible that it might be a trick of the eye, something as thin as a hair seemed to flit momentarily across the view.

Then it was gone.

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2. The Origin of Serpentine Analogues in the Blood of Papist Peoples:

Her Britannic Majesty, Anne VI, rather liked the Star Chamber. True, its power had been monstrously abused at times in the past five centuries—secret trials leading to secret executions of people who were probably more innocent than the monarchs sitting on the judgment seat—but even in the glorious Empire, there was a place for this kind of hearing. The queen on this side of the table, one of her subjects on the other . . . it had the air of a private chat between friends: a time when difficulties could get sorted out, one way or another.

"Well, Mr. Darwin," she said after the tea had been poured, "it seems you've stirred up quite a hornet's nest. Have you not?"

The fiercely bearded man across the table did not answer immediately. He laid a finger on the handle of his cup as if to drink or not to drink was some momentous decision; then he said, "I have simply spoken the truth, ma'am . . . as I see it."

"Yes; but different people see different truths, don't they? And a great many are upset by the things you say are true. You are aware there has been . . . unpleasantness?"

"I know about the riots, ma'am. Several times they have come uncomfortably close to me. And of course, there have been threats on my life."

"Indeed." Anne lifted a tiny slice of buttered bread and took what she hoped would seem a thoughtful nibble. For some reason, she always enjoyed eating in front of the accused here in the Star Chamber; they themselves never had any appetite at all. "The threats are one reason We invited you here today. Scotland Yard is growing rather weary of protecting you; and Sir Oswald has long pondered whether your life is worth it."

That got the expected reaction—Darwin's finger froze on the cup handle, the color draining away from his face. "I had not realized. . . ." His eyes narrowed. "I perceive, ma'am, that someone will soon make a decision on this issue."

"Exactly," the queen said. "Sir Oswald has turned to the crown for guidance, and now We turn to you." She took another tiny bite of the bread. "It would be good of you to explain your theories—to lay out the train of reasoning that led to your . . . unsettling public statements."

"It's all laid out in my book, ma'am."

"But your book is for scientists, not queens." Anne set down the bread and allowed herself a small sip of tea. She took her time doing so, but Darwin remained silent. "Please," she said at last. "We wish to make an informed decision."

Darwin grunted . . . or perhaps it was a hollow chuckle of cynicism. An ill-bred sound in either case. "Very well, Your Majesty," he nodded. "It is simply a matter of history."

"History is seldom simple, Mr. Darwin; but proceed."

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"In . . . 1430-something, I forget the exact year, Anton Leeuwenhoek appeared before Supreme Patriarch Septus to discuss the absence of snakes in the bloodstream. You are familiar with that, ma'am?"

"Certainly. It was the pivotal event in the Schism between Our church and the Papists."

"Just so."

Anne could see Darwin itching to leap off his chair and begin prowling about the room, like a professor lecturing to a class of dull-lidded schoolboys. His strained impetuosity amused her; but she hoped he would keep his impulses in check. "Pray continue, Mr. Darwin."

"It is common knowledge that the Patriarch's decision led to a . . . a deluge, shall we say, of people peering at their own blood through a microscope. Only the upper classes at first, but soon enough it spread to the lower levels of society too. Since the church allowed anyone to look into a microscope without cost, I suppose it was a free source of amusement for the peasantry."

"An opiate for the masses," Anne offered. She rather liked the phrase—Mr. Marx had used it when *he* had his little visit to the Star Chamber.

"I suppose that must be it," Darwin agreed. "At any rate, the phenomenon far outstripped anything Septus could have foreseen; and even worse for the Patriarchy, it soon divided the church into two camps—those who claimed to see snakes in their blood and those who did not."

"Mr. Darwin, We are well aware of the fundamental difference between Papists and the Redeemed."

"Begging your pardon, ma'am, but I believe the usual historical interpretation is . . . flawed. It confuses cause and effect."

"How can there be confusion?" Anne asked. "Papists have serpents in their blood; that is apparent to any child looking into a microscope. We Redeemed have no such contaminants; again, that is simple observational fact. The obvious conclusion, Mr. Darwin, is that Christ Herself marked the Papists with Her curse, to show one and all the error of their ways."

"According to the Papists," Darwin reminded her, "the snakes are a sign of God's blessing: a sleeping snake means sin laid to rest."

"Is that what you think, Mr. Darwin?"

"I think it more practical to examine the facts before making any judgment."

"That is why we are here today," Anne said with a pointed glance. "Facts . . . and judgment. If you could direct yourself to the heart of the matter, Mr. Darwin?"

"The heart of the matter," he repeated. "Of course. I agree that *today* any microscope will show that Papists have snakes in their bloodstream . . . or as scientists prefer to call them, serpentine analogues, since it is highly unlikely the observed phenomena are actual reptiles—"

"Let us not bandy nomenclature," Anne interrupted. "We accept that

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the entities in Papist blood are unrelated to cobras and puff adders; but they have been called snakes for centuries, and the name is adequate. Proceed to your point, Mr. Darwin."

"You have just made my point for me, ma'am. Five centuries have passed since the original controversy arose. What we see *now* may not be what people saw *then*." He took a deep breath. "If you read the literature of that long-ago time, you find there was great doubt about the snakes, even among the Papists. Serpentine analogues were extremely rare and difficult to discern . . . unlike the very obvious entities seen today."

"Surely that can be blamed on the equipment," Anne said. "Microscopes of that day were crude contrivances compared to our fine modern instruments."

"That is the usual argument," Darwin nodded, "but I believe there is a different explanation."

"Yes?"

"My argument, ma'am, is based on my observations of pigeons."

Anne blinked. "Pigeons, Mr. Darwin?" She blinked again. "The birds?" She bit her lip. "The filthy things that perch on statues?"

"Not wild pigeons, Your Majesty, domestic ones. Bred for show. For example, some centuries ago, a squire in Sussex took it into his head to breed a black pigeon from his stock of gray ones."

"Why ever would he want a black pigeon?"

"That remains a mystery to me too, ma'am; but the historical records are clear. He set about the task by selecting pigeons of the darkest gray he could find, and breeding them together. Over many generations, their color grew darker and darker until today, the squire's descendants boast of pigeons as black as coal."

"They boast of that?"

"Incessantly."

Darwin seized up a piece of bread and virtually stuffed it into his mouth. The man had apparently become so engrossed in talking, he had forgotten who sat across the table. *Good,* Anne thought; he would be less guarded.

"We understand the principles of animal husbandry," Anne said. "We do not, however, see how this pertains to the Papists."

"For the past five centuries, Your Majesty, the Papists have been going through exactly the same process . . . as have the Redeemed, for that matter. Think, ma'am. In any population, there are numerous chance differences between individuals; the squire's pigeons, for example, had varying shades of gray. If some process of selection chooses to emphasize a particular trait as desirable, excluding other traits as undesirable—if you restrict darker birds to breeding with one another and prevent lighter ones from contributing to the bloodline—the selected characteristic will tend to become more pronounced with each generation."

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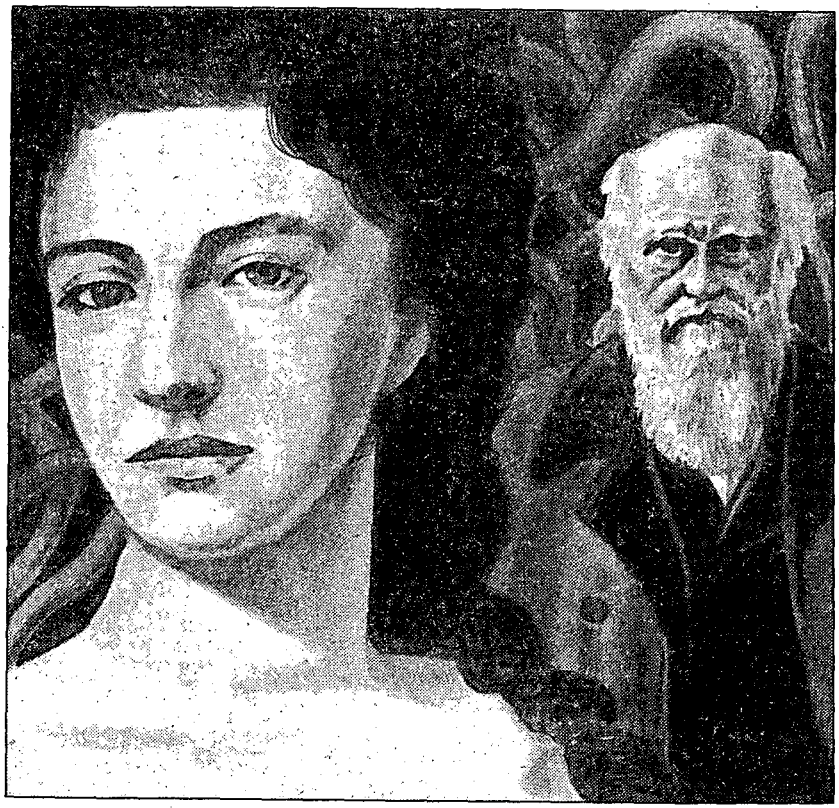

"You are still talking about pigeons, Mr. Darwin."

"No, ma'am," he said triumphantly, "I am talking about Papists and the Redeemed. Let us suppose that in the times of Patriarch Septus, some people had almost imperceptible serpentine analogues in their bloodstream—a chance occurrence, just as some people may have curls in their hair while others do not."

Anne opened her mouth to say that curls were frequently not a chance occurrence at all; but she decided to remain silent.

"Now," Darwin continued, "what happened among the people of that day? Some saw those tiny, almost invisible snakes; others did not. Those who saw them proclaimed, *This proves the unshakable word of Mother Church.* Those who saw nothing said, *The scriptures cannot be taken literally—believers must find the truth in their own hearts.* And so the Schism split the world, pitting one camp against another."

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"Yes, Mr. Darwin, We know all that."

"So, ma'am, you must also know what happened in subsequent generations. The rift in belief created a similar rift in the population. Papists only married Papists. The Redeemed only married the Redeemed."

"Of course."

"Consequently," Darwin stressed the word, "those who could see so-called snakes in their blood only married those of similar condition. Those who saw nothing married others who saw nothing. Is it any wonder that, generation by generation, snakes became more and more visible in Papist blood? And less and less likely to be seen in the Redeemed? It is simply a matter of selective breeding, ma'am. The Papists are not different from us because the Virgin put her mark on them; they are different because they selected to *make* themselves different. To *emphasize* the difference. And the Redeemed have no snakes in their blood for the same reason—simply a side effect of our ancestors' marital prejudice."

"Mr. Darwin!" Anne said, aghast. "Such claims! No wonder you have angered the Papists as much as your own countrymen. To suggest that God's sacred sign is a mere barnyard accident. . . ." The Queen caught her breath. "Sir, where is your decency?"

"I have something better than decency," he answered in a calm voice. "I have proof."

"Proof? How could you prove such a thing?"

"Some years ago, ma'am," he said, "I took passage on a ship sailing the South Seas; and during that voyage, I saw things that completely opened my eyes."

"More pigeons, Mr. Darwin?"

He waved his hand dismissively. "The birds of the Pacific Islands are hardly fit study for a scientist. What I observed were the efforts of missionaries, ma'am; both Papists and the Redeemed, preaching to the natives who lived in those isles. Have you heard of such missions?"

"We sponsor several of those missions personally, Mr. Darwin."

"And the results, ma'am?"

"Mixed," Anne confessed. "Some tribes are open to Redemption, while others . . ." she shrugged. "The Papists do no better."

"Just so, Your Majesty. As an example, I visited one island where the Papists had been established for thirty years, yet the local priest claimed to have made no *true* converts. Mark that word, *true*. Many of the natives espoused Papist beliefs, took part in Papist worship, and so on . . . but the priest could find no snakes in their blood, so he told himself they had not truly embraced Mother Church."

"You would argue with the priest's conclusion?"

"Certainly," Darwin replied. "In my eyes, the island tribe was simply a closed population that for reasons of chance never developed serpentine

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analogues in their blood. If you interbreed only white pigeons, you will never develop a black."

Anne said, "But—" then stopped stone-still, as the words of a recent mission report rose in her mind. *We are continually frustrated in our work on this island; although the people bow before God's altar, their blood continues to show the serpent-stain of the Unclean. . . .*

"Mr. Darwin," Anne murmured, "could there possibly be islands where all the people had snakes in their blood, regardless of their beliefs?"

"There are indeed, ma'am," Darwin nodded. "Almost all the island populations are isolated and homogeneous. I found some tribes with snakes, some without—no matter which missionaries ministered there. When the Papists land among a people who already have analogues in their bloodstream, they soon declare that they have converted the tribe and hold great celebrations. However, when they land among a people whose blood is clear . . . well, they can preach all they want, but they won't change the effects of generations of breeding. Usually, they just give up and move on to another island where the people are more receptive . . . which is to say, where they have the right blood to begin with."

"Ah."

Anne lowered her eyes. Darwin had been speaking about the Papists, but she knew the same was true of Redeemed missionaries. They tended to stay a year in one place, do a few blood tests, then move on if they could not show results—because results were exclusively measured in blood rather than what the people professed. If missionaries, her own missionaries, had been abandoning sincere believers because they didn't believe the conversions were "true" . . . what would God think of that?

But Darwin hadn't stopped talking. "Our voyage visited many islands, Your Majesty, a few of which had never received missionaries of any kind. Some of those tribes had serpentine analogues in their blood, while some did not . . . and each island was homogeneous. I hypothesize that the potential for analogues might have been distributed evenly through humankind millennia ago; but as populations grew isolated, geographically or socially—"

"Yes, Mr. Darwin, We see your point." Anne found she was tapping her finger on the edge of the table. She stopped herself and stood up. "This matter deserves further study. We shall instruct the police to find a place where you can continue your work without disturbance from outside sources."

Darwin's face fell. "Would that be a jail, ma'am?"

"A comfortable place of sanctuary," she replied. "You will be supplied with anything you need—books, paper, all of that."

"Will I be able to publish?" he asked.

"You will have at least one avid reader for whatever you write." She fa-

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vored him with the slightest bow of her head. "You have given Us much to think about."

"Then let me give you one more thought, Your Majesty." He took a deep breath, as if he was trying to decide if his next words would be offensive beyond the pale. Then, Anne supposed, he decided he had nothing to lose. "Papists and the Redeemed have been selectively breeding within their own populations for five hundred years. There may come a time when they are too far removed from each other to be . . . cross-fertile. Already there are rumors of an unusually high mortality rate for children with one Papist parent and one Redeemed. In time—millennia perhaps, but in time—I believe the two populations may split into separate species."

"Separate species? Of humans?"

"It may happen, Your Majesty. At this very moment, we may be witnessing the origin of two new species."

Queen Anne pursed her lips in distaste. "The origin of species, Mr. Darwin? If that is a joke, We are not amused."

3. The Efficacy of Trisulphozyymase for Preventing SA Incompatibility Reactions in Births of Mixed-Blood Parentage:

The hearing was held behind closed doors—a bad sign. Julia Grant had asked some of her colleagues what to expect and they all said, *Show trial, Show trial.* Senator McCarthy loved to get his name in the papers. And yet the reporters were locked out today; just Julia and the Committee.

A very bad sign.

"Good afternoon, Dr. Grant," McCarthy said after she had sworn to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. His voice had a smarmy quality to it; an unpleasant man's attempt at charm. "I suppose you know why you're here?"

"No, senator."

"Come now, doctor," he chided, as if speaking to a five-year-old. "Surely you must know the purpose of this Committee? And it therefore follows that we would take great interest in your work."

"My work is medical research," she replied tightly. "I have no political interests at all." She forced herself to stare McCarthy in the eye. "I heal the sick."

"There's sickness and there's sickness," the senator shrugged. "We can all understand doctors who deal with sniffles and sneezes and heart attacks . . . but that's not your field, is it?"

"No," she answered. "I'm a hematologist, specializing in SA compatibility problems."

"Could you explain that for the Committee?"

The doctor suspected that every man on the Committee—and they

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were all men—had already been briefed on her research. If nothing else, they read the newspapers. Still, why not humor them?

"All human blood," she began, "is either SA-positive or SA-negative—"

"SA stands for Serpentine Analogue?" McCarthy interrupted.

"Yes. The name comes from the outdated belief—"

"That some people have snakes in their bloodstream," McCarthy interrupted again.

"That's correct."

"*Do* some people have snakes in their bloodstream?" McCarthy asked.

"Snake-like entities," another senator corrected . . . probably a Democrat.

"Serpentine analogues are not present in anyone's bloodstream," Julia said. "They don't appear until blood is exposed to air. It's a specialized clotting mechanism, triggered by an enzyme that encourages microscopic threads to form at the site of an injury—"

"In other words," McCarthy said, "SA-positive blood works differently from SA-negative. Correct?"

"In this one regard, yes," Julia nodded.

"Do you think SA-positive blood is *better* than SA-negative?"

"It provides slightly more effective clotting at wounds—"

"Do you *admire* SA-positive blood, doctor?"

Julia stared at him. Mentally, she counted to ten. "I am fascinated by all types of blood," she answered at last. "SA-positive clots faster . . . which is useful to stop bleeding but gives a slightly greater risk of stroke. Overall, I'd say the good points and the bad even out. If they didn't, evolution would soon skew the population strongly one way or the other."

McCarthy folded his hands on the table in front of him. "So you believe in evolution, Dr. Grant?"

"I'm a scientist. I also believe in gravity, thermodynamics, and the universal gas equation."

Not a man on the Committee so much as smiled.

"Doctor," McCarthy said quietly, "what blood type are you?"

She gritted her teeth. "The Supreme Court ruled that no one has to answer that question."

In sudden fury, McCarthy slammed his fist onto the table. "Do you see the Supreme Court in here with us? Do you? Because if you do, show me those black-robed faggots and I'll boot their pope-loving asses straight out the window." He settled back in his chair. "I don't think you appreciate the seriousness of your situation, Dr. Grant."

"What situation?" she demanded. "I am a medical researcher—"

"And you've developed a new drug, haven't you?" McCarthy snapped. "A new *drug*. That you want to loose on the public. I wonder if the person who invented heroin called herself a medical researcher too?"

"Mr. McCarthy, trisulphozymase is not a narcotic. It is a carefully developed pharmaceutical—"

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"Which encourages miscegenation between Papists and the Redeemed," McCarthy finished. "That's what it does, doesn't it, doctor?"

"No!" She took a deep breath. "Trisulphozymase combats certain medical problems that occur when an SA-positive father and an SA-negative mother—"

"When a Papist man sires his filthy whelp on a Redeemed woman," McCarthy interrupted. "When a Papist *fucks* one of the Saved! *That's* what you want to encourage, doctor? That's how you'll make the world a better place?"

Julia said nothing. She felt her cheeks burn like a child caught in some forbidden act; and she was infuriated that her reaction was guilt rather than outrage at what McCarthy was saying.

Yes, she wanted to say, *it* will *make the world a better place to stop separating humanity into hostile camps.* Most people on the planet had no comprehension of either Papist or Redeemed theology; but somehow, the poisonous idea of blood discrimination had spread to every country of the globe, regardless of religious faith. Insanity! And millions recognized it to be so. Yet the McCarthys of the world found it a convenient ladder on which they could climb to power, and who was stopping them? Look at Germany. Look at Ireland. Look at India and Pakistan.

Ridiculous . . . and deadly, time and again throughout history. Perhaps she should set aside SA compatibility and work on a cure for the drive to demonize those who were different.

"A doctor deals with lives, not lifestyles," she said stiffly. "If I were confronted with a patient whose heart had stopped beating, I would attempt to start it again, whether the victim were an innocent child, a convicted murderer, or even a senator." She leaned forward. "Has anyone here ever seen an SA incompatibility reaction? How a newborn infant dies? How the mother goes into spasm and usually dies too? Real people, gentlemen; real screams of pain! Only a monster could witness such things and still rant about ideology."

A few Committee members had the grace to look uncomfortable, turning away from her gaze; but McCarthy was not one of them. "You think this is all just ideology, doctor? A lofty discussion of philosophical doctrine?" He shook his head in unconvincing sorrow. "I wish it were . . . I truly wish it were. I wish the Papists weren't trying to rip down everything this country stands for, obeying the orders of their foreign masters to corrupt the spirit of liberty itself. Why should I care about a screaming woman, when she's whored herself to the likes of them? *She* made her decision; now she has to face the consequences. No one in this room invented SA incompatibility, doctor. *God* did . . . and I think we should take the hint, don't you?"

The sharp catch of bile rose in Julia's throat. For a moment, she couldn't find the strength to fight it; but she couldn't be sick, not in front of these

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men. Swallowing hard, she forced herself to breathe evenly until the moment passed. "Senators," she said at last, "do you actually intend to suppress trisulphozymase? To withhold life-saving treatment from those who need it?"

"Some might say it's a sign," McCarthy answered, "that a Redeemed man can father a child on a Papist without complications, but it doesn't work the other way around. Doesn't that sound like a sign to you?"

"Senators," she said, ignoring McCarthy, "does this Committee intend to suppress trisulphozymase?"

Silence. Then McCarthy gave a little smile. "How does trisulphozymase work, doctor?"

Julia stared at him, wondering where this new question was going. Warily, she replied, "The drug dismantles the SA factor enzyme into ba-

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sic amino acids. This prevents a more dangerous response from the mother's immune system, which might otherwise produce antibodies to the enzyme. The antibodies are the real problem, because they may attack the baby's—"

"So what you're saying," McCarthy interrupted, "is that this drug can destroy the snakes in a Papist's bloodstream?"

"I told you, there *are* no snakes! Trisulphozymase temporarily eliminates the extra clotting enzyme that comes from SA-positive blood."

"It's only temporary?"

"That's all that's needed. One injection shortly before the moment of birth—"

"But what about repeated doses?" McCarthy interrupted. "Or a massive dose? Could you *permanently* wipe out the SA factor in a person's blood?"

"You don't administer trisulphozymase to an SA-positive person," Julia said. "It's given to an SA-negative mother to prevent—"

"But suppose you *did* give it to a Papist. A *big* dose. *Lots* of doses. Could it destroy the SA factor forever?" He leaned forward eagerly. "Could it make them like us?"

And now Julia saw it: what this hearing was all about. Because the Committee couldn't really suppress the treatment, could they? Her results were known in the research community. Even if the drug were banned here, other countries would use it; and there would eventually be enough public pressure to force re-evaluation. This wasn't about the lives of babies and mothers; this was about clipping the devil's horns.

Keeping her voice steady, she said, "It would be unconscionable to administer this drug or any other to a person whose health did not require it. Large doses or long-term use of trisulphozymase would have side effects I could not venture to guess." The faces in front of her showed no expression. "Gentlemen," she tried again, "in an SA-positive person, the enzyme is *natural*. A natural component of blood. To interfere with a body's natural functioning when there is no medical justification . . ." she threw up her hands. "Do no harm, gentlemen. The heart of the Hippocratic Oath. At the very least, doctors must do no harm."

"Does that mean," McCarthy asked, "that you would refuse to head a research project into this matter?"

"Me?"

"You're the top expert in your field," McCarthy shrugged. "If anybody can get rid of the snakes once and for all, it's you."

"Senator," Julia said, "have you no shame? Have you no shame at all? You want to endanger lives over this . . . triviality? A meaningless difference you can only detect with a microscope—"

"Which means they can walk among us, doctor! Papists can walk *among* us. Them with their special blood, their snakes, their damned in-

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breeding—they're the ones who care about what you call a triviality! They're the ones who flaunt it in our faces. They say they're God's Chosen. With God's Mark of Blessing. Well, I intend to *erase* that mark, with or without your help."

"Without," Julia told him. "Definitely without."

McCarthy's gaze was on her. He did not look like a man who had just received an absolute no. With an expression far too smug, he said, "Let me tell you a secret, doctor. From our agents in the enemy camp. Even as we speak, the Papists are planning to contaminate our water supply with their damned SA enzyme. Poison us or make us like *them* . . . one way or the other. We *need* your drug to fight that pollution; to remove the enzyme from our blood before it can destroy us! What about *that,* Dr. Grant? Will your precious medical ethics let you work on a treatment to keep us safe from their damned Papist toxins?"

Julia grimaced. "You know nothing about the human metabolism. People couldn't 'catch' the SA factor from drinking water; the enzyme would just break down in your stomach acid. I suppose it might be possible to produce a methylated version that would eventually work its way into the bloodstream. . . ." She stopped herself. "Anyway, I can't believe the Papists would be so insane as to—"

"Right now," McCarthy interrupted, "sitting in a committee room of some Papist hideaway, there are a group of men who are just as crazy as we are. Believe that, doctor. Whatever *we* are willing to do to them, they are willing to do to *us*; the only question is, who'll do it *first.*" McCarthy settled back and cradled his hands on his stomach. "Snakes all 'round, Dr. Grant. You can make a difference in who gets bitten."

It was, perhaps, the only true thing McCarthy had said since the hearing had begun. Julia tried to doubt it, but couldn't. SA-positive or negative, you could still be a ruthless bastard.

She said nothing.

McCarthy stared at her a few moments more, then glanced at the men on both sides of him. "Let's consider this hearing adjourned, all right? Give Dr. Grant a little time to think this over." He turned to look straight at her. "A *little* time. We'll contact you in a few days . . . find out who scares you more, us or them."

He had the nerve to wink before he turned away.

The other senators filed from the room, almost bumping into each other in the hurry to leave. Complicitous men . . . weak men, for all their power. Julia remained in the uncomfortable "Witness Chair," giving them ample time to scurry away; she didn't want to lay eyes on them again when she finally went out into the corridor.

Using trisulphozymase on an SA-positive person . . . what would be the effect? Predictions were almost worthless in biochemistry—medical science was a vast ocean of ignorance dotted with researchers trying to stay

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afloat in makeshift canoes. The only prediction you could safely make was that a large enough dose of *any* drug would kill the patient.

On the other hand, better to inject trisulphozymase into SA-positive people than SA-negative. The chemical reactions that broke down the SA enzyme also broke down the trisulphozymase—mutual assured destruction. If you didn't have the SA enzyme in your blood, the trisulphozymase would build up to lethal levels much faster, simply because there was nothing to stop it. SA-positive people could certainly tolerate dosages that would kill a . . .

Julia felt a chill wash through her. She had created a drug that would poison SA-negatives but not SA-positives . . . that could selectively massacre the Redeemed while leaving the Papists standing. And her research was a matter of public record. How long would it take before someone on the Papist side made the connection? One of those men McCarthy had talked about, just as ruthless and crazy as the senator himself.

How long would it take before they used her drug to slaughter half the world?

There was only one way out: put all the snakes to sleep. If Julia could somehow wave her hands and make every SA-positive person SA-negative, then the playing field would be level again. No, not the playing field—the killing field.

Insanity . . . but what choice did she have? Sign up with McCarthy; get rid of the snakes before they began to bite; pray the side effects could be treated. Perhaps, if saner minds prevailed, the process would never be deployed. Perhaps the threat would be enough to force some kind of bilateral enzyme disarmament.

Feeling twenty years older, Dr. Julia Grant left the hearing room. The corridor was empty; through the great glass entryway at the front of the building, she could see late afternoon sunlight slanting across the marble steps. A single protester stood on the sidewalk, mutely holding a sign aloft—no doubt what McCarthy would call a Papist sympathizer, traitorously opposing a duly appointed congressional committee.

The protester's sign read, "*Why do you concern yourself with the sleeping creature before you, when you are blind to the serpents in your own heart?*"

Julia turned away, hoping the building had a back door. ●

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Uncle River

PASSING THE TORCH

Uncle River tells us he "suspects that sanity requires more of peace and [illegible] commonly is available on this planet. Once trained in Jungian Analysis, I now live as far out of the city as possible for what purpose-tive I can find." While the author has a regular column in Britain's *Back Brain Recluse*, and has written and published in small presses for many years, he considers "Passing the Torch" to be his first major sale.

Illustration by Mike Aspengren

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"I'm sorry, all the plumbers are in jail." The woman's voice on the other end of the phone sounded angry. Then she cut the connection.

Esther Pernion stared at the dead phone, confused. I'm too tired for this, she thought.

Esther felt weak as she walked the few steps to her threadbare, royal blue-and-grey easy chair. At least her legs worked all right, and her arms as she lowered herself into the seat. She sat a few moments, reassembling her thoughts.

She had had another "spell" this morning. Let's not kid ourselves, she thought, another *stroke.* The sudden headache, the weakness, the confusion—Esther knew the symptoms. Well, that sort of thing happens. At seventy-two, she'd had one that slurred her voice and caused her to limp for six months. She didn't think her speech was slurred this time. They'd wanted to put her in an "old people's prison," as she put it, back then. Now, at eighty-two she still lived alone.

"But Mom," Jennifer'd said just last month, "I worry about you. Something could *happen.*"

"You mean I could die with no one around to poke a needle in my ass," Esther retorted.

"Now, *Mom. . . .*"

"You're just afraid I'll fall down and the county blade driver will find me two weeks later in a puddle of piss, and *you'll* be publicly embarrassed."

Jennifer left angry. Esther felt a little guilty later, but her life was *her life.*

So now what? Esther wasn't sure how long she had been sitting, musing. Had she dozed off a bit?

Let me see, Esther thought: I had another stroke this morning. It was when I couldn't find the jar opener and tried to open the olives by hand. So I took a couple Tylenol and noticed the puddle. That's it, that's what I was calling for; I wanted a plumber.

The headache was gone. The Tylenol must have worked. Esther still was unsure how much time had passed. She felt thirsty. She decided to brew some tea. Jennifer had given her one of those new temperature-sensitive microwaves, but Esther kept it unplugged and stored dried fruit in it.

"Mom, why are you so anti-technology?" Jennifer had asked.

"I like technology just fine," Esther had snapped back. She didn't mean to snap, but she knew she did. "I just don't need a lot of *gadgets* cluttering up my life."

Jennifer's feelings were hurt, but Esther still wouldn't use the microwave. She did like her propane stove. She filled the tea kettle, careful not to run much water down the apparently faulty drain, then set it on

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the left front burner. She was almost back to her easy chair when she realized she had forgotten to turn on the stove. Damn, she thought, strokes are so tiring. The few steps back to the stove were an effort.

Esther poured dry mullein, rose hips, and a little mint into her round, brown-glazed tea pot. She considered having coffee instead to perk her up, but decided, what with the stroke, that that wasn't such a good idea. She had already drunk two cups of coffee that morning. A doctor would, no doubt, tell her to quit entirely. Well, she'd never expected to live to be eighty-two. As long as she *was* still alive, she might as well enjoy it. Tea was pleasant too, though.

Esther set her cup and saucer on the faded oak table by her chair, along with the honey and a spoon. She sat down again, waiting for the water to boil, enjoying the view out her kitchen window. Bare trees curved angular against a bright blue sky: alder, walnut, larger cottonwoods. Piñons, junipers, and live oaks stood somber green on grey and buff bluffs. Perhaps she would go outside. The breeze carrying the last wisps of cloud from yesterday's rain off to the northeast might be chilly, but the November sun was shining so brilliantly that she was sure it would be comfortable in the lee of the house. A bug, immobilized all morning by last night's cold, now crawled around the outside of the south-window screen.

While the tea steeped, Esther suddenly recalled that she had intended to call a plumber, and decided to try again. She picked up the receiver and held it to her ear. She felt sufficiently disoriented that it was several seconds before she realized that there was no dial tone. She set the receiver down and checked to be sure the wire wasn't loose. It was tight. She tried the phone again. It was quite dead.

This is becoming a decidedly odd day, Esther thought. She considered becoming alarmed, but felt that would bring back her headache. So she sat back down in her chair and poured a cup of tea through the strainer instead. Then she opened the little drawer in the front of the side table and got out her small green stone pipe and the small round tin of marijuana. She filled the pipe, then lit it with her new glo-lite. Despite denigrating gadgets to Jennifer, Esther had no objection to something that did the job *better*. She had yet to use up a glo-lite, though she had lost two.

If anyone had asked, Esther would have said that the marijuana was a vaso-dilator and blood-pressure regulator and was thus medically appropriate following her stroke. She had never consulted a doctor on the matter. She considered it medicine for the soul regardless. She inhaled smoke, touched the pipe to her forehead, raised it aloft, then inhaled again. She set the pipe down, stirred honey into her tea, sipped, and contemplated.

Outside, the breeze occasionally gusted to a proper wind. Might be

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some weather coming, Esther thought, forgetting about yesterday's that was leaving. She could feel the spirits riding the wind.

Like her tea and honey, marijuana smoke, juniper smoke in the wood stove, the spirits each had a flavor, mostly familiar. Nature spirits danced, slumbered, or roared, crisp or pungent, not especially human, but nourishing in their vitality. There were others too: kind but prickly ones, the busy spirits that fondled and worried so many lives, the nasty ones whose food was suffering itself.

Something felt different, today, though, Esther thought, sipping her tea while the marijuana caressed her sore brain. In all these years, the thing she still found a mystery was how to tell what is subjective and what objective. Only by comparing inner perspective to outer event had Esther ever been able to locate experience. So, she mused, is all this activity happening because I'm going to die today? Is that it? Did the world shut down on me today because I'm getting ready to leave this old body? Or does it have some purpose of its own to which I am participant . . . or observer . . . or totally incidental? Nearby spirits felt stronger. Bigger, more distant spirits felt scattered. Now what could that mean?

Esther set her teacup down and dozed. She had been sleepy after previous strokes too.

A hurried knock at the door woke Esther. The sun shone right on her, which meant it must be about to set. Esther's brain and mouth both felt blurry. A sip of cold tea tasted much better than cold coffee would have. "Coming," she called.

Esther remembered to stand slowly. She still felt a little dizzy, but her coordination seemed normal as she walked to the door, straightening her soft, blue, shapeless sweat shirt as she went. She brushed a wisp of white hair off her right ear, then opened the door. Her veiny hand felt a little weak, but it gripped normally. She hoped her voice was clear.

Esther's neighbor, Prabaht, stood at the door. Esther always meant to ask him about his name. It sounded Indian to her, though his brown hair and fair, if tanned, features looked North European. Prabaht wore faded jeans and an old black T-shirt in the cool, late afternoon breeze. Fortyish, medium height and bone-skinny, Esther always figured his blood circulated double-time to keep him warm. Perpetually active, Prabaht never accomplished much, as he never slowed down enough to organize his actions. Esther saw no sign of Prabaht's truck. He must have walked the third of a mile.

"Come on in. Have a seat."

Prabaht burst through the door but didn't sit. "Have you heard?"

Prabaht's hovering and pacing had once irritated Esther. Now she just sat down herself. "I'm a little tired today. Make yourself coffee. Heard what?"

"The shit hit the fan this morning." Prabaht set the kettle on the stove

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to boil and put a paper towel in the funnel for a filter over the glass coffee pot.

Esther thought of her misbehaving drain—and brain. "Things have been a little off," she said.

"They didn't come here, did they?" Prabaht stared, intense.

"You're the only person who's come here all day. What's happened?"

"They started rounding up everyone with a drug record. Then things got crazy." Prabaht scooped coffee into the ersatz filter and fussed impatiently at the kettle.

"I should think!" Esther replied. "Numbers *alone* . . ."

But then she did think. Subjective and objective: Everyone mixes them. It can't be helped. Prabaht always jumped to conclusions, nearly always wrong. *Something* had happened, no doubt, but Prabaht's projections almost certainly misinterpreted events.

Prabaht paced, drank coffee, and ranted about the government and the Jesuits. Esther filled her pipe again and lit it. Prabaht glanced, somewhat wild-eyed, out the window, then smoked with her. Esther knew it made him uncomfortable that she just set the pipe on the table when it was empty, but she refused to acquiesce to his paranoia by hiding it.

"I've seen the maps, you know," Prabaht said, over his second cup of coffee.

"I'm hungry," said Esther. "Will you join me for dinner?"

"Can't stay," said Prabaht, "but you go ahead."

Esther did. She spooned cooked beans into a pan with a little bacon grease and set it on the stove to heat, got out a jar of salsa—she still put up a full year's worth—and warmed a flour tortilla. Sometimes she would fix a plate for Prabaht even if he said no. He would usually eat it. This evening, she didn't bother. If he consumed nothing but coffee until he starved, that was his problem.

"They've had streets laid out for a concentration camp right up at Longhorn Gap for *years!*" Prabaht's voice faded into a meaningless hum. What Esther enjoyed about him, she thought, was the way his knees and elbows flapped about as he paced and jabbered, like a hyperactive heron.

Esther grated a bit of longhorn cheese, carefully scooped the beans onto the tortilla with the cheese and salsa, folded the tortilla, then ate her supper with a knife and fork, while Prabaht's voice played on in rhythm with his body.

Breeze stilled. Sun set. A moon, more than half full, illuminated the peaceful yard. Esther could hear Walnut Creek, fifty feet from the house, behind gaps in Prabaht's monologue.

Prabaht paused, stood stock still for the first time since entering. Esther knew this signal, and focused in on him as he said, "Well, got to go. I'll stop by tomorrow, they don't haul me off first. Need anything?"

"I could use a little wood split," said Esther, "if you have time."

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"Sure." Prabaht flicked on the yard light and strode out the door.

The house still held the sunny afternoon's warmth, but Esther built a fire for evening. She knew she would be sleepy again soon. She heard the quick axe strokes in the yard as she washed her dish, spoon, knife, fork, and grater while the fire caught.

Prabaht carried in the full kindling box, followed by four armloads of aromatic juniper and solid oak. Esther held out two dollar bills.

"That's all right," Prabaht raised a hand.

"No, you take it," said Esther.

It was a ritual repeated many times in the two and a half years that Prabaht had been Esther's closest neighbor. Esther's social security was a meager income, but consistent, and she owned her house outright. Erratically employed and poorly organized, Prabaht was in constant danger of losing his home for failure to pay the ninety-dollar-a-month rent.

Prabaht stuffed the two dollars in his pants pocket, reheated the last of the coffee, and drained the pot. "Well, got to go," he said as he plunked his cup down.

"Good to see you," said Esther, as Prabaht stalked out in his T-shirt through the chilly moonlit evening.

Esther set an oak log on the fire—quite as substantial as she cared to lift—adjusted the damper, rinsed out the coffee pot and Prabaht's cup, as well as her own tea cup, and then decided she might as well go to bed. Best thing for a stroke is a good night's sleep, she thought. Then it occurred to her: Oh damn! I didn't think to ask Prabaht to look at that drain.

Esther looked for the puddle. It seemed smaller, rather than larger, even after she had washed the few dishes. Oh, well, perhaps things would make better sense tomorrow.

In the morning, Esther felt better, but decided perhaps she should only have one cup of coffee. She added a dollop of half-and-half; it was almost gone.

Esther sat in her chair and contemplated the way the sun sparkled on the morning's frost. She had intended to drive to town today to pick up the mail and a few groceries—before she was reduced to using that hideous powdered creamer in the coffee. The four-and-a-half mile trip once a week kept the faded red Valiant that had looked new fourteen years ago when she'd bought it (though, of course, it wasn't) adequately lubricated. The only major work she had ever had to do on it was to have the wheel wells modified to accomodate taller wheels, so that she would have the clearance she needed crossing the creek.

But maybe she should wait a day. Perhaps she should give Stella at the post office a call. Better to say she would be in in a day or so than to have someone nosing around suspecting her of being unable to take care of herself.

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Esther put on her glasses and read a bit in an historical novel from the State Library Books by Mail—a wonderful program for rural people. Then she made herself a boiled egg and a slice of toast, and did have another third of a cup of coffee. At eight thirty-five, she tried calling the post office. Her phone was still dead.

Many people Esther's age spent their lives in front of a television. Till the advent of cable, which did not extend far enough out of town to reach Esther, and the satellite dish, reception was inadequate to make television worth the bother at Esther's house. Visitors were appalled. Jennifer wanted to help Esther buy a satellite dish.

"If I wanted all that racket, I'd have moved to some noisy hell hole like Phoenix long ago."

Jennifer brought the subject up every six months. Esther always said no. In her urgency to defend her independence, she usually managed to say it in a way she later felt guilty for. Oh well, Esther thought, if a daughter hasn't gotten used to you after sixty years, what's to be done?

Despite not wanting a television, there were occasions when Esther would have liked some news. She did have a radio, two in fact. One was part of her tape player. The other had been a bonus with a magazine subscription. Neither currently worked. Due to distance and mountains, reception was abysmal even if they had. Only the Navajo station out of Window Rock came in clearly, and, of course, most of the news on it was in Navajo.

Esther put on her brown wool jacket, and a brown wool hat with orange decorations she had knitted since last winter and only first worn the past couple of weeks, and went outside. The thermometer, shaded by the overhang of the roof, read twenty-seven degrees, but bright sun had already melted the frost off the car. Birds chirped in the clear, still morning. The sun felt warm and invigorating.

Esther walked to the car and raised the hood, careful not to exert herself too suddenly: Don't want to pop another blood vessel, she thought. The sun shone full on the battery. If the phone still didn't work in an hour, she thought she would drive in and see what was going on. Little backwaters on the creek held a thin skim of ice, crystal patterns radiating artfully. A fat ground squirrel scooted past. Esther walked thirty or forty yards along the bank of the creek. Then she heard a scrabbling sound.

Esther looked among the winter-bare brush. Why, there were the chickens! She hadn't seen them in days. Descended from fighting stock, they looked like banties. She had originally gotten them to keep the scorpions down. Skunks, coyotes, and who knows what-all had done in every attempt Esther had made to keep a penned laying flock. These, loose and wild, managed to survive and perpetuate themselves. She wondered if she were just sleeping too soundly to notice, or if they were roosting so far off that she wasn't hearing the roosters.

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Esther got half a coffee can of cracked corn from the shed and tossed it about. The chickens scrambled for it. There were at least twenty, including six roosters and two chicks she didn't recall seeing before, only now feathered out; their mother must have hidden them in the woods while they were smaller. One of the roosters crowed, ruffling his rich red neck and iridescent green tail feathers.

Thanksgiving's coming up, Esther thought. I'll invite Prabaht and have him catch us a young rooster. Even a young rooster would have to be boiled all day before she roasted it, or it would be too tough to eat, but the flavor was the best. The things one doesn't expect, Esther thought, like still having my own teeth at eighty-two!

Depending on the direction of the wind, Esther could sometimes hear vehicles on the two-lane highway a mile away down the canyon, sometimes not. A logging truck slowing for the curve just south of the turnoff was the sound she heard most regularly. She hadn't noticed any this morning. She looked down the canyon now at the sound of something approaching. A tangy whiff of juniper smoke from her stovepipe wafted by as a modest-sized but snappy motorcycle pulled into view.

The rider was almost to the house before Esther recognized her sixteen-year-old great-grandson, Peter. Peter's mother, Esther's granddaughter Sylvia, was, last Esther knew, in the midst of yet another catastrophic relationship. Peter lived with his grandmother, Jennifer, in Socorro—a hundred and fifty miles away. Esther felt sorry for Peter, having to be a boy with an unmarried mother, unknown father, and a divorced grandmother and great-grandmother. Still, that was no excuse to cut school.

Peter rounded the final curve. Then, instead of slowing down to ford the creek, he sped up, and roared across in a cloud of spray. Esther shook her head and smiled. Peter parked his bike by Esther's car and hopped off. "Car broke?" he asked.

"I'm just letting the sun warm the battery." Esther gave Peter a big hug. "Isn't it a school day?"

"I tried to call; the phones are out."

"Oh. I thought it was just mine."

"Ma Jen figured I better get here while I could."

Esther recalled Prabaht's ranting. She had not felt up to paying much attention. A lot of Prabaht's talk was paranoid fantasy anyhow.

"Bring your things in the house," Esther said. "Then explain. Have you had breakfast?"

"Nope." Peter grinned and jumped to unsnap the bungies holding the pack on the back of his bike. Whatever was happening, Esther could see that the teenager considered it a great adventure.

Peter followed Esther into the house. The refrigerator was humming.

"Wow!" Peter said, "you've got electricity!"

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"Of course," said Esther.

"It's out in town."

"Oh?" This was far from the first time Esther had been blissfully unaware of a power outage. Between photovoltaics and the little hydro system on the creek, she had more electricity than she knew what to do with. She had heard computers on such a home system had difficulty with voltage irregularities, but none of the few appliances Esther ran seemed to mind.

"Damn, it's a good thing I got here," Peter said.

Esther felt a flash of irritation. Her daughter wasn't trying to run her life again, was she? She also noticed Peter's use of profanity. Well, so long as he didn't become *really* foul-mouthed, she could hardly object. She said more than an occasional "damn" herself. Still, it was disconcerting having a great grandson a head taller than oneself. "What do you mean?" Esther asked, keeping her voice neutral. "Bacon and eggs sound good?"

"Sounds great. You really haven't heard? The shit hit the fan!"

"That's what Prabaht said, but . . ." Esther did not want the boy to know why she had no idea what else her neighbor may have told her. ". . . I haven't heard the details yet."

Peter didn't notice his great grandmother's evasion. He told her what he knew, which was not altogether clear: Someone had ordered surprise mass arrests yesterday, before dawn. Only, of course, that didn't work. Lots of cops warned their families and friends. Information leaked to radio and television stations. Some officials balked. Police records did seem to affect who got raided. If drug-related police records had any special part in it, as Prabaht had said, Peter didn't mention it. Thousands of people were taken by surprise, but what started as a mass police raid degenerated, within hours, into mass chaos.

Peter had set out about one yesterday afternoon. His grandmother reasoned that his petty infractions, all still juvenile, might not be listed beyond the county. Esther had her doubts about this reasoning, but she didn't say anything. It had taken Peter twenty hours to come one hundred and fifty miles. He had evaded four roadblocks, half a dozen places where he heard gunfire, though he didn't know what any of them were about, and stolen a gallon of gasoline. Normally, his great-grandmother would object strenuously to this last, but under the circumstances. . . . He had not eaten since yesterday morning

So far as Esther could tell, Peter was having the time of his life.

Esther had started to fry Peter three slices of bacon. She doubled that and got out a third egg. He ate four slices of toast while the bacon and eggs cooked.

"Um, do you have coffee?" Peter asked.

"When did you start drinking coffee?" Esther snapped back.

Peter mumbled something unintelligible.

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All unbidden, an image flew into Esther's mind of herself at fourteen, smoking a cigarette in her room by an open window. She'd heard her mother's step on the stairs. Out the window went the cigarette, where it landed on the awning of the window below. Thank heavens a neighbor noticed the fire before the whole house went up! After that, her mother told her that if she was going to do anything so disgusting as smoke, she might as well do it in the open where at least she wouldn't burn the house down. She did, too; she didn't quit till she was sixty-one and nearly died of pneumonia for the third time.

Esther set the kettle on the stove, rinsed the glass coffee pot, and scooped coffee into a fresh paper towel in the funnel.

After he was done eating, Peter washed the dishes, which Esther thought extraordinarily considerate. As he dried his hands, he smiled and asked, "Got any smoke?"

Peter had been smoking pot, that Esther knew of, since he was eight. She still wasn't sure if she approved, but she was sure there was less harm to it than alcohol or cigarettes. "Oh, yes."

"Let's boke a smole."

The little green stone pipe still sat on the table by Esther's chair. She never had put it away last night. "In the drawer," she said.

Peter got out the tin of mixed leaf and bud and filled the pipe. "This all you've got?"

"There's more."

There *are* a few compensations to being eighty-two, Esther thought. One was that you could embarrass busybody authorities. Every year, small armies of cops descended on the area, usually in September, thrashing about in the woods in camouflage uniforms, purporting to search for marijuana crops. Every year, there were horror stories, mostly of completely innocent citizens being terrorized in their own homes. Every year, a few dozen pot plants were discovered and triumphantly displayed to the press—as if this somehow justified helicopters buzzing homes, roadblocks, and God only knew how much expenditure of tax money.

Afterward, the County and State would invariably spend more defending themselves from lawsuits than they realized in fines. Prabaht always claimed that creating employment for lawyers was the primary purpose of the whole affair. "No one grows a commercial crop around here anyhow. It's too hard to hide. There's not enough places with that much natural water."

Whatever the reason, Esther kept her eyes open, since she really did grow herself a small pot crop. On two occasions in the last five years, she caught investigators snooping around. Once, the man was a stranger, alone. She ranted at him about property rights and fences. The other time, it was a local deputy she had known all his life. Esther threatened

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to shoot his balls off. She was certain her white hair greatly improved the effectiveness of this strategy.

Peter lit the pipe and passed it to Esther. She sat down in her chair, raised the pipe in dedication, and smoked. Peter squatted next to her.

Just a moment after they were done, the chickens started squawking. Peter jumped to the window. "I think there's someone out there," he said.

Esther stood slowly and joined Peter at the window. A furtive figure dashed from a clump of live oak to a clump of juniper. Esther realized, as she stood beside her great-grandson, that Jennifer had sent him to her not for her protection but for *his*. This realization improved both Esther's feeling for her daughter and her self-confidence.

Esther smoothed the maroon sweat shirt she was wearing today and walked across the room. She cleared her throat and opened the door. "Hey, Prabaht!" she called.

"Everything all right?" Prabaht called back from behind his juniper.

"Of course. Come on down."

Prabaht wore olive-green pants and an emerald-green long-sleeved shirt, his idea of camouflage, not altogether relevant amid the sparse vegetation of the largely autumn-brown hillside. He had smudged charcoal on his face, wore a handgun at his side in a holster originally made for a larger model, and had a twelve-gauge shotgun slung over his shoulder by a dirty piece of rope. He looked with blatant suspicion at the motorcycle.

"You know Peter," Esther said.

Prabaht's smudged face registered confusion.

"My great-grandson," Esther added. "He's here . . . hiding out."

It was the last comment that finally made sense to Prabaht. "Ah!" Prabaht had spent the whole morning sneaking around the hills. Since he hadn't spoken to anyone, he had no idea what was going on.

"More or less normal in town," said Peter, "except not a lot was open, and the electric was out."

"Hmmm," said Prabaht portentiously.

Tellez, population four hundred, including outlying homes such as Esther's, was the county seat, and the biggest community in eighty miles. Somewhere else, a town so small might be lucky to have a variety store. Due to distance, Tellez supported, if marginally, a variety of businesses, from an auto parts/chain saw repair shop to something that called itself a boutique (known locally as The House of Bad Taste), lodged in a rat-infested trailer that would have been condemned by the Health Department someplace with enough population to *have* a Health Department.

"I need to take a little rest," said Esther. "While you're figuring out what's happened to the world, see if you can find where the chickens are roosting."

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Esther lay down and slept for an hour. When she woke, she could hear Prabaht and Peter talking quietly outside, and could smell coffee. A shadow called her attention to the sky. A few little clouds were coming in from the northwest.

Esther patted her hair and sweat shirt into shape, then set a fresh pot of beans to soak. She jumped when the phone rang. She heard Peter laugh, and glanced out the window. The phone had so startled Prabaht that he had fallen on his face. Esther wondered how much coffee he had drunk—and whether he had eaten anything.

The phone didn't ring a second time, but Esther picked it up. Nothing. She hung it up and stood a few seconds, then started back across the room. The phone tinked once as if it was trying to ring. Esther picked it up again. This time there was a dial tone.

Peter stuck his head in the door.

"I believe the phone's fixed," Esther said. "Maybe we should let your grandmother know you arrived safely."

"Tell her in code," said Prabaht.

Esther seldom made long distance calls on daytime rates, but she thought that she really should call Jennifer, as much to be sure everything was all right down there as to tell her that Peter had arrived. Esther dialed Jennifer's number. The phone emitted the quick buzz of a busy circuit. She tried several more times, but didn't get through. She decided to try a local number. She thought a moment, then dialed the Senior Center. This time she got the longer buzz of a busy line. She tried again, and it rang.

"Tellez Senior Center. Lucy Meadowcroft speaking."

"Lucy, this is Esther Pernion. The phone's been out. I just wanted to see if it's working again."

"Are you all right?" Lucy asked.

"I'm fine, thank you. Do you know what's been going on?"

"Not really, but it's not good." That was what Esther liked about the Tellez Senior Center Director. Lucy didn't think that you were an idiot just because you were old. "There's been some sort of civil upheaval nationwide. The news doesn't make a lot of sense. You don't have TV, do you?"

"No."

"I guess we can be thankful we're not in Albuquerque. The electricity's still out. We're fixing meals here for anyone who needs it."

"I've got my own electric," Esther said.

Prabaht gestured and stage-whispered, "Don't. Phone taps."

Ridiculous, Esther thought. Even if they did tap the line, who would *listen?* The whole population would have to be employed listening to each other. The distraction caused her to miss something Lucy said. "Excuse me, what was that again?"

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"I said come on down if you want to watch the news later. But if you're all right, we should clear the line. Now the phone's back on, I want to give everyone a call."

"Okay," said Esther, "thanks. Speak to you later."

Only after she hung up did it occur to her to wonder what the Senior Center was running its television on. Someone must have brought a generator over.

Esther tried Jennifer's number every hour or so. Usually she got a busy circuit signal. About three, it rang, but there was no answer. By then, clouds were starting to pile up. If it was going to storm, just as well to get the mail today . . . and see what there was to see. "Want to ride into town with me?" Esther asked.

"Sure," said Peter.

Prabaht looked about wildly, then said, "I'll come too."

"Only if you wash your face and leave the side arms here."

Prabaht fidgeted and mumbled, but complied.

The hood of Esther's Valiant was still open. Peter checked the various fluids. The radiator and oil were both fine. Esther checked them regularly herself. "Check the brake fluid, would you," Esther called. "The cap's too tight for me." Peter checked it. It was fine too.

Esther considered her reflexes slow, but she actually zipped right along once they hit pavement, and dodged a confused rabbit with no difficulty. In town, several generators clattered, one of them at the Tellez Mercantile, which was open. Esther parked there. She believed it was bad for the car to start it an extra time just to drive the fifty yards from the store to the post office, though nearly everyone else did just that.

Esther, Peter, and Prabaht headed for the post office, across the street from the courthouse, which was next door to the Tellez Mercantile. As they passed the courthouse, Undersheriff Colin Scofield emerged from the Sheriff's Office in back and called out, "Hello."

Prabaht froze, a look of panic on his face.

"Hi, Colin," Esther answered. "Any idea what's going on?"

"It's a mess," Colin replied, striding toward Esther and her companions with notable agility for a man who weighed nearly four hundred pounds. "Everything all right with you?"

"Just fine, except I've been trying to call my daughter in Socorro and can't get through."

"If it's an emergency, I could try."

"No, just want to be sure she's okay."

"I think the circuits are pretty tied up," said Colin. "Probably clear out later. Let me know if you need anything."

"Sure thing. Thanks."

Colin headed toward the Tellez Mercantile.

"You can start breathing again," said Peter quietly to Prabaht.

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"Did you notice how evasive he was?" Prabaht replied, as they continued on to the post office.

Stella Martinez, the postmistress, was terribly upset. There had been no mail delivery at all yesterday. Today, the mail had come in, almost on time, but it was extremely skimpy, and the weekly advertizing circulars that should have arrived yesterday still weren't here.

"Any idea what's going on?" Esther asked.

"It's the Governors' Executive Commission," the postmistress answered. "They decided that the Federal Government wasn't doing enough about crime, so they got up a warrant for four million people. Of course, it didn't work very well."

"Idiots," said Esther.

"That's not it at all," Joe Galloway chimed in as he shut his post office box and pocketed the key. Joe, in his mid-thirties, with heroic chest and shoulders and receding chin and hair, was a part-time logger, part-time outfitter's assistant, and part-time barfly.

"You heard better news?" Stella asked.

"Yeah," said Joe, "just a few minutes ago. They're saying now that it was a sort of palace coup at the F.B.I. They been accused of racism again. Got the top dogs at each other's throats. Someone figured to embarrass someone else by issuing this mass arrest order under the Known Criminals Law."

"Any idea who?" asked Prabaht.

"Nah," said Joe. "Maybe they'll say on the five-thirty news."

"Well, that's clear as mud," said Suzie Romero, who came in just in time to hear Joe's explanation of events. She was older than Esther and half Apache, her long hair still more black than grey.

"Should have grilled Colin," said Esther. "He certainly acted like the cat that ate the ballot box."

Suzie, Joe, and Stella all laughed. Manuel Tellez had been sheriff two terms, so he couldn't run again. The primary was only six months off.

"Colin was on duty when the order came in," said Stella. "With the sheriff out of county delivering a juvenile to Las Cruces, and an arrest list of a hundred and ninety-two, he figured that a four-man department wasn't enough personnel. So he'd wait till Manuel got back to do anything."

"Pass the buck. Smart man," said Joe.

"A hundred and ninety-two people's *10 percent* of the county," said Esther. "That's a lot of votes."

"Sheriff didn't get back till noon today," said Stella. "Now Colin's glad he didn't do anything. State and Feds picked up about thirty people here in county. I hear most of them are already planning to sue."

"That was fast," said Esther.

"Magistrate gave them the idea."

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"Oh?" asked Esther.

"Colin called Grant Harkins 'cause the jail was full . . . at five in the morning."

Joe guffawed. Everyone looked his way. He explained. "Grant closed down the Dry Gulch the night before. Bet he had a head like a watermelon."

"He asked Colin where the arrests occurred," Stella went on. "When Colin said at people's homes, Grant told him to let anyone out that wasn't arrested by the State Police, 'cause the other officers didn't have jurisdiction. Turned out a BLM Officer signed all the papers. Way I heard it, Colin hollered, 'Weren't none of these arrests legal,' opened the doors, and told everyone to go home. Of course, anyone that lived out of town was stuck for a ride, and it was still just past five A.M."

"Ol' Colin ain't so dumb," said Joe. "He'll get my vote."

"What if there was a *real* crime, like a hold-up?" asked Peter.

"Colin's a crack shot, and he knows this country," said Joe.

"If the percentage was the same nationwide," said Prabaht, "does that mean someone tried to arrest *twenty-five million people* yesterday? That's crazy!"

"Things looked pretty crazy to *me*," said Peter.

"Oh?" said Joe.

"Came up from Socorro," Peter explained. Everyone ignored Prabaht's facial contortions.

"It's worse than crazy," said Suzie. "It's *stupid*."

Nobody said anything about who the hundred and ninety-two people on the list for arrest might have been.

"All these damn generators are giving me a headache," said Esther. "I'm ready to go back where it's quiet." She said good-bye and headed for the store, tossing the week's mail into the car on the way. There was a letter from her sister, Grace, in Abilene, which she knew would be mostly about doctors and barely legible, and half a dozen solicitations to buy things she didn't need and couldn't afford. At the store, Esther bought a can of coffee, a head of lettuce, a pound of bacon, a pound of margarine, a gallon of milk, and three onions. She let Peter add three candy bars and a bag of chips . . . and carry the sack to the car.

"If you're too tired, I can drive," said Peter.

"I'm just tired of banging generators," said Esther. "Anyhow, you drive too fast."

"You're no slouch yourself."

Esther smiled. "I mean on the dirt. Way you crossed the creek this morning, you'd punch the shocks right through the floor."

Esther invited Prabaht to join them for dinner. He accepted, but suggested they stop at his house for a chunk of meat.

Prabaht had taken an elk that fall, sort of legally. He had a license, for

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bow season, but his method was a little unusual. He lassoed his elk from a tree, then jumped down on its back and slit its throat. Between being stiff from waiting nearly forty hours for an elk to walk under him and the fact that the elk fought *back,* Prabaht was half-crippled for a month afterward.

He had a somewhat unorthodox freezer too, an old camper shell he had buried and lined with foam insulation. He had to crawl in with a flashlight to get anything. The compressor ran directly off a water-wheel on the creek. Prabaht intended to generate electricity off the same water-wheel, but never got around to building the system. He had been in a war for a year with the State Engineer, known locally as the Water God of the West, over the water-wheel. Prabaht claimed that he didn't realize he needed permission, since it was nonconsumptive use. "Mean-ass, murdering son-of-a-bitch is just trying to deny my permit 'cause I applied after the fact! Bastard'll claim I need a permit to breathe *air* next!"

"Do you like acorn squash?" Esther asked, to change the subject.

"Sure," said Peter.

"Good. You clean a couple. They're in the back bedroom. I'm ready for another little nap. If I'm asleep in an hour, rub them down with oil, and set them in the oven on three seventy-five."

Esther dumped the junk mail in the firestarter box, set the letter from her sister on the side table by her chair, and took a toke from her pipe. "Help yourself," she said to Peter. Then she lay down and pulled the blue wool blanket over herself. She wasn't really sleepy. She just needed to withdraw and think.

Esther let the generator banging seep out of her brain.

"Shit," Esther heard Peter say from outside, she frowned at his choice of word, "she must have ten years of firewood!" Esther wondered if Prabaht's not-quite-audible reply bore any resemblance to reality.

Most people locally considered it gross tyranny that the Forest Service required a permit for local firewood usage. Esther bought permits from the Forest Service for the full ten cord personal use maximum and then got someone to cut the wood for her on a one third-two thirds share. That ten cords' worth of permit always produced a few extra cords. Everyone Esther had dealt with took as much pride in delivering her fair third as they did in getting something unauthorized out of the Forest Service.

Prabaht probably was embellishing this simple conflict with extravagant conspiracy fantasies, Esther thought, and yet . . . She realized that the world her great grandson was growing up into was what she needed to contemplate.

Esther thought back. When she'd divorced Jerome, in the early sixties, it was already not the shock such events had been only a decade earlier. Still, it was traumatic. Stolid Jennifer's marriage had been traumatic, the divorce a relief.

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Sylvia . . . It pained Esther to think of her granddaughter's chaotic life. She couldn't blame Jennifer. Jennifer could be overbearing, but *she* was the stable one. It was *Esther* who undertook risqué adventures: hitchhiking at seventy, smoking pot—let alone *growing* it. People Prabaht's age thought nothing of smoking pot, approve or disapprove, but Esther still knew hardly anyone of her own generation who smoked.

Now there was Peter. With no stable male role model, with an upbringing far more chaotic than his mother's, he seemed bright and well-adjusted. What was she to make of it all? Perhaps it was easier to grow up sane in a blatantly insane world than to watch apparent stability disintegrate. Esther recalled the insanities of her own youth called Hitler and Stalin, the shocks of World War II, the bomb, the Kennedy assassination, the increasing social turbulence ever since.

In Esther's youth, the world had an apparent order, with its clearly defined good and its evil, its stability of family, community, and religion, and its aberrations of war and Depression. That was no longer so. Prabaht's paranoia, Colin's opportunism—personality flaws, sure, but they were also part of the society her great-grandson was growing to adulthood in. What was she to make of it? What, on the summit of her life's long climb, could she give him to help him make *sense* of the unknown world he would live in?

Esther could hear the low hum of Peter talking with Prabaht: A good man, she thought, but a walking encyclopaedia of misinformation. Could someone Peter's age understand that? Peter's a sharp kid, she thought, but what does he have to measure his perspective *against?*

Still alert, Esther drifted in the spirit realm of her own mind.

Subjective and objective, how was one to tell? The creek and juniper trees on the bluff, now that was objective. A feeling came to Esther that she knew she had felt before. It belonged to the spirit realm, which made it all the more difficult to differentiate subjective and objective: an intensification of the nearby and a dissipation of the larger but farther away. Is it my nearing death? she thought. That seemed redundant. You could not live alone, so isolated, at forty-two, let alone eighty-two, without confronting your own death. A long-familiar companion, death taught an awe that enhanced the canyon's beauty to her aging senses.

Esther thought of the events of the last two days. Whatever lunacy had occurred nationally, the effects were *local* wherever you were: Lucy Meadowcroft having access to a generator, Grant Harkins being hungover. True everywhere, but more obvious in Tellez because you *knew* everybody.

Esther felt the spirits all around her. They were like colors and flavors, but she had no names for them.

Esther had tried church once, around the time of the divorce, and had been cruelly snubbed for the very reasons she needed spiritual solace.

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She had learned some Apache and Zuni names for spirits, but, well, she wasn't Apache or Zuni. After all these years, it still bothered her not to have a handle on the substance of her own soul. Thinking of Peter, she realized, as she had before but with great immediacy and poignancy, that this was not just a personal condition.

Values, Esther thought. No one can really tell him what to do, how to act, what to call the brightness the pot helps me see when I close my eyes but have no name for. And not just because he's young and spunky. *No one* knows. I certainly don't know what he'll need to know next *week*, let alone by the time he's my age! That's always so, but it has so speeded up in my lifetime. I remember the first talking movies, and now you can have a videophone if you're rich. Fast as things change, *I* might even live long enough to have one. I read once that the first ballpoint pens cost thirty-five dollars, and now look at how cheap they are. Would I want a videophone? What values is Peter learning? It's not what values I would teach him if I had any idea *what* to teach, Esther thought. It's what values does he learn from his *own* experience? What can I give him that he can make any sense of at all?

Esther opened her eyes. There was a dim lavender glow as the last of the sunset reflected off thickening clouds beyond sun-faded curtains. She was not aware of having slept, but the squash were in the oven and it was on. The elk meat was also on the stove, stewing with onions and garlic Esther could smell.

Esther stepped outside. The air felt balmy and smelled wet. She went back in and checked the food. The squash had not been in long. The stewing meat needed water, which she added. She wondered if Prabaht or Peter would think to check it before the meat scorched. Esther sat down to read her novel. She certainly hoped that whatever insanity was going on in the world would not affect the State Library Books by Mail program. She had read barely a page when Prabaht and Peter came back in.

"We followed the chickens, but we didn't find any eggs," said Peter. "I'll try again in the morning."

"Okay. Shall we try calling your grandmother again?"

"Sure."

Esther dialed Jennifer's number. The line rang, but there was still no answer. She hung up after the tenth ring.

"How 'bout some tunes," said Prabaht.

Concerned for her daughter, Esther looked up and blinked. "What? Oh, sure." Sometimes Prabaht could be amazingly insensitive. Esther turned to Peter. "Would you like to pick a tape?"

"Okay." Peter looked about, spotted the basket of tapes on the shelf below the player, and rummaged through them. "How about this one?" he said, holding the tape out to Esther.

It was her Glenn Miller tape, a little scratchy, as the records had been

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pretty worn by the time she'd recorded them onto the tape, but still one of her favorites. "Sure." She smiled.

Peter put the tape in the player and turned it on. "In the Mood" recalled a world in which Esther had been younger than her great-grandson was now. Her foot tapped a bit of long-remembered rhythm.

A few minutes later, the phone rang. Esther answered. "Hello."

"Hello, Mom."

"Jennifer, are you all right? I've been trying to call all day."

"I'm fine. Is Peter there?"

"Yes. Do you want to speak to him?"

"In a minute. I mostly wanted to be sure he made it okay."

"He's fine."

"If I'd had any idea . . ."

Esther noticed Prabaht gesticulating, his eyes wild again.

"It's not so bad up here. What's happened? Are you home?"

"Yes," said Jennifer, "finally. There was a fire."

"There?"

"No, a couple blocks away, but they evacuated the neighborhood. There was some looting. I believe someone was shot. They just let me come home."

"Is everything all right?"

"It seems to be. The electricity's still out, but things are calmed down now, and the fire's out . . . or not spreading at least."

"Good Lord!"

"Mom, would it be too much trouble if Peter stayed with you a few days—maybe even till after Thanksgiving?"

"Good heavens, Jen, you don't have to *ask!*"

"I don't want to impose."

That's Jennifer, Esther thought. She'd carry the world on her shoulders if it turned to silly putty. "It's no imposition at all. He's a pleasure to have." And I'm not too old to want my great-grandson where he's safe, Esther thought, but did not say in front of the boy. "Are you all right down there?"

"Yes. And I'm not sure I could get to you," Jennifer responded to her mother's unvoiced suggestion. "There are roadblocks. They've called out the National Guard. . . ."

"They're not still trying to arrest half the country, are they?" Esther asked.

"Oh, no," said Jennifer, "except looters. They're plenty busy now just trying to restore order."

Whoever "they" are and whatever *that* means, Esther thought. "Well, it's certainly a relief to hear your voice," she said. "Have you heard anything from Sylvia?"

"Her boyfriend was picked up, but they released him on his own recognizance today."

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"What did they charge him with?"

"That's not real clear."

"No, I suppose not. I'm just glad you're safe. Here's Peter."

Peter told Jennifer less of his adventurous ride than he had told Esther. Esther could tell Jennifer was admonishing Peter not to impose. She doubted this was useful advice. Jennifer achieved little but to make Peter uncomfortable.

No harm done, apparently. Peter's discomfort melted the instant he handed the phone back to Esther. "You take care," Esther said, "and don't worry about Peter and me. We're just fine."

Prabaht's eyes flared wild, and he gnawed at his lower lip, but he had sense enough not to pester. Esther felt sorry for Prabaht's perpetual anxiety. She knew he had at least moments of self-awareness. He had once said: "The one nice thing about paranoia is that you get so many pleasant surprises when the disasters you expect don't happen."

"Pennsylvania Six Five Thousand," said the tape.

Dinner was excellent. The warm leading edge of the front still made a fire unnecessary, but thick clouds reduced the moon's light. Esther offered Prabaht the loan of a flashlight to walk home, but he said he didn't need it.

"Just don't fall in the creek and get your guns wet," said Peter.

Esther sighed inwardly. What was the boy learning from his life?

When Esther woke in the morning, the house was still fairly warm, but she could see snow coming down fast and thick in the growing light. She lit the wood stove, then filled the kettle to heat. Peter appeared just as Esther finished pouring water into the paper towel/coffee filter, attracted by the aroma, she figured.

"Wow!" Peter said, "it never snows like this in Socorro! Think we'll be snowed in?"

"I certainly wouldn't drive in it," Esther said. She poured them each a mug, added milk to hers and asked, "Do you want milk?"

"No, thanks," said Peter.

"I hope you'll drink some," said Esther. "I can't use up a gallon myself."

"How about cornbread to go with the beans?" Peter picked up the mug of black coffee and carried it to the window. "Maybe I can find where the chickens are nesting in the snow."

"If they're laying any."

Esther carried her coffee to her chair. Peter continued to stand at the window. "Can I call you G. E.?" Peter asked abruptly.

"G. E.?"

"For Granny Esther."

"No. That's awful. If you're too big to call me Granny, just call me Esther like everyone else."

"I'd feel funny."

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"It's a funny world." Esther peered over her coffee at her tall great-grandson. His face mostly looked eager.

"I'm going to see if I can find any eggs," said Peter.

"You got gloves?"

"Nah. It's not that cold."

Esther didn't reply. She was pretty sure there were some gloves that would fit him . . . somewhere, if the mice hadn't gotten to them. What she *did* say was, "I'm going to put on some oatmeal. Want any?"

"Okay." He slipped on his light-weight brown leather jacket and a green-and-yellow ball cap. "I'll be back in a few." And out he plunged into the snow.

That looks like fun, Esther thought. Maybe I'll go out in it myself later.

She set on a pot of oatmeal and tossed in a big handful of two-year-old dried apricots. (Spring frosts had done in the blossoms this year and last.) Then she sat in her chair to contemplate. Two days in a row of Prabaht really was a little much, even without having a stroke and the world going nuts. But Peter . . . she was enjoying having him here, for all it was a distraction. Distraction from *what?* she wondered. From whatever it is I do sitting in this chair when I'm alone, she decided. Still, having a young person need her felt good. She hoped he wouldn't be too bored between now and Thanksgiving.

The oatmeal got done; Esther turned it off. The snow fell so thick that she couldn't see the car. A person could get lost in a hurry in a storm like this, but how lost could a person get in a canyon a hundred yards wide?

A few minutes later, Peter stomped up to the door. "I couldn't see a thing," he blurted. "Bet I can find them in the snow when it quits, though."

"Good idea." Esther handed Peter the broom. "Brush off on the porch so you don't soak yourself and the house."

An hour later, the snow turned to rain. It poured all day long. "Think the creek'll flood?" Peter asked.

"Probably not," Esther answered, "but it will come up."

It did just that. They heard it through the rain. Peter dashed out during a lull toward late afternoon to look. He came back only moderately soggy. "Bet it's up a foot," he said. "Hey, what do you do about the phone bill if you can't get out in winter for a month?"

Esther was impressed. Peter had been visiting her for longer or shorter stays all his life. He knew she kept food and propane well-stocked for just such a contingency. He really was growing up even to think of such a question.

"I usually keep a couple months credit," Esther said. "But don't let that give you ideas about calling all your friends."

They both blushed, then laughed.

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"It's a local phone company," Esther added. "If I do get behind, they're nice about it."

"That's different."

"They're related to half the county. Would you want two hundred great-grandmothers mad at you?"

Peter gave his great-grandmother a look of horror. They both laughed again.

Esther did make cornbread to go with the beans that evening. Peter offered to do the dishes. Esther accepted.

"Hey, there's a puddle," Peter said.

Esther looked. "I forgot about that." She recalled now, her attempt to call a plumber. I must have been in worse shape than I realized to do that without asking Prabaht or someone to try to fix it first. Wonder who I called. . . . She recalled looking in the phone book under plumbers. . . . Good Lord, I think I dialed the one in Arizona with the big ad!

"It wasn't here yesterday," Peter said.

"It was the day before. I thought there was something wrong with the drain."

"Or the drainage." Peter looked out the window where the rain continued to pour down from the once again impenetrable night sky. "Did it rain a couple of days ago?"

"Some."

"I could look under the house."

"I'd appreciate it," said Esther, "but this will do till daylight." She tossed him an old towel.

By morning, the rain had slowed to an intermittent drizzle. The creek, double its usual width and two feet deep, flowed muddy and turbulent. Peter ran out, delighted to watch it rumble past. Esther put on an old yellow rain coat with a nice, snug hood and joined him.

"This is great!" Peter shouted over the rushing water. "How long do you think it'll last?"

"At least all day," Esther shouted back, "even if it doesn't rain anymore."

A little later, over a cup of tea and the pipe, Peter looked at his great-grandmother, seriously, and said, "Gra . . . Esther, do you think . . . that is . . . Could I . . . Could I stay here?"

Esther was not really surprised by the question, but she thought before answering. He was having an adventure now. That would wear off. She would feel useful, and she had to admit it would be a help. But her privacy . . . She had a brief flash of suspicion. Had Jennifer put him up to this? She felt ashamed of that thought at once. I'm getting as paranoid as Prabaht, she thought. The world's getting loonier all the time. He'd certainly be safer here. Finally she answered, "Wouldn't you be bored to death?"

"I don't think so. Prabaht was talking about running a trap line . . ."

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"Heaven help us!"

"What's wrong?"

"Prabaht tried that last winter. He has got to be the world's least competent trapper. His total take consisted of one jack rabbit—by accident, because he forgot to bait that trap."

"He told me about that. He wasn't properly equipped. He only had his traps out the last couple weeks of the season."

"What makes you think he'll do any better this year?"

"I'll be with him."

How could she answer that? It wasn't important. What mattered was his future, and, for her, whether she could live with a sixteen-year-old boy. He would have friends. He would have girlfriends. He would have his own taste in music.

"We could try it, maybe, if your grandmother agrees." She felt a twinge at leaving his mother out of the picture, but Sylvia *was* out of the picture. "I'd want you to go to school."

"What for?"

She was a little shocked he was so forthright. "I'm not sure, but it is still important to finish high school . . . I think."

"Well, okay." He sounded a little less enthusiastic.

"You still want to stay?"

"Yes." Almost defiant.

"Let's see."

"I could help you out."

"I know that." She didn't intend the edge to her voice she knew was there.

Peter didn't notice. "Grandma says . . ."

". . . Says I'm too old to take care of myself and shouldn't stay up here alone anymore."

Peter heard the edge now. "I didn't mean . . ."

"I almost croaked the other day."

Peter's mouth fell halfway open.

"But I didn't. Maybe I'll drop dead right now. Maybe I'll live to be a hundred and fifty. . . ."

Neither of them knew what to say.

What if I become incapacitated in a year? Esther thought. Should a boy his age be saddled with that? It was the thing she really feared most, far more than she feared the possibility of dying messily alone. "Let's see how we both feel in a week," Esther finally said.

"Okay," Peter answered.

It rained off and on in the night, but by morning there were patches of blue. The creek was still up. About ten, Prabaht showed up with a newspaper, only slightly damp. He spread it on the kitchen table so they all could see it.

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"Top Officials Deny Responsibility," read the biggest headline. So what else is new? Esther thought.

"Here's the real news." Prabaht turned to page five.

Esther's eyes landed on the largest headline on the page: "Ohio Attorney General Doubts Warrants." The article began: "Citing several cases making their way through the courts, Ohio Attorney General Arthur McGuire doubts 'John Doe Warrants' will suffice for female detainees."

"See." Prabaht pointed to a smaller article. Esther read the headline: "Bishop Deplores Suffering." The article was about how the Diocese of Las Cruces was helping people displaced by the continuing civil disorder.

"I don't get it," said Peter.

"What bishop?" Prabaht pointed to the end of the brief article.

Peter read aloud: " 'On behalf of the bishop, Special Aide Father Luis Morales.' So? It's crazy in Cruces too."

"You left out the important part," Prabaht replied ominously. He read: " 'Special Aide Father Luis Morales, S.J.' "

"So what?" said Peter.

"Don't you *see?*" said Prabaht. "The whole thing was a set-up by the Jesuits!"

Esther tuned out.

If Peter stayed, she'd need to move the squash and put a stove in that back bedroom. She had plenty of firewood anyhow.

Prabaht said something about logging trucks rolling again.

"In this slop?" said Peter.

"On pavement." Then Prabaht veered off to expound on the effect on local employment of a proposed $1.50 a gallon fuel tax.

Much as it pleased her that Peter understood such an issue, Esther's concerns carried her away from the conversation. "I could do with some quiet. Why don't you take it out in the sunshine," she said.

Peter and Prabaht went outside. Esther sat in her comfortable chair and contemplated.

Subjective and objective. Esther felt that she understood, at least a bit more, what she perceived in the spirit realm. Out there in the big world, the events of the last few days made everything just a little more disjointed, made everyone just a little more dissociated from a social order that had seemed so certain when Esther was Peter's age.

I've been fighting Jennifer over my independence, Esther thought. The objective and subjective meet in funny ways. I'm still not sure about living with anyone, but it *is* getting harder to manage. And Peter needs something too. That makes it all different.

Worth my privacy? Worth my independence? Better him than a stranger. I could tell him about the cigarette and the awning. A story like that would only annoy Jennifer, only frighten Sylvia. Peter would get a

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kick out of it, and *because* he would, he would learn a little of the so-solid world I was that girl in.

I have no idea how he should live, but he could use to hear of a world that was solid once, to know such a thing is possible. Jennifer can't give him that, just because she's too solid herself. Subjective and objective.

There's been a special light in my life. I've called it Freedom. I've called it this canyon. Jerome never saw it. Jennifer seemed determined not to see it. Sylvia . . . I'm not sure she's ever been *there* enough to know *what* she sees, like Prabaht.

Am I indulging in wishful thinking, hoping Peter is someone to pass the torch to, wanting the end of my life to have meaning?

I don't have to answer to that question, Esther thought, and smiled. I see his hand reached out, to receive and to give—even if neither of us knows quite *what*.

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William John Watkins

17 QUESTIONS THE JUDGES AT NUREMBERG FORGOT TO ASK

1. Did a hair
floating in the sink
bring them up short, shaving?

2. Did horror well up
from the clogged drain?

3. Did they fish out nests
of the family's hair,
matted and drenched,
without a hint of recognition?

4. Did they ever wake sobbing?

5. Did they strop razors
to surgical sharpness
without a qualm,
waiting for the screaming
to die down in the mirror?

6. Did false teeth in a glass
strike sudden terror into them,
those dentists with hammers
tap-tapping among the dead?

7. Did their teeth
ever ache without reason?

8. Did they ever wake sobbing
to the sound of sobbing?

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9. Were there ever bones in their soup?

10. Did pepper ever feel like furnace ash?

11. Did the sausages in the pan
ever steal up on them and turn
at the last instant
into the stench of the ovens?

12. Did they get up abruptly
from their meals,
their burgher stomachs
suddenly sour?

13. Did they ever wake sobbing
to the sound of sobbing
and find it their own?

14. Did the windshriek
waiting for the trolley
ever startle them into half-confessions
there in the street
with no one to listen?

15. Did the squeal
of the trolley wheels
on cold rails
make them shrink back, afraid?

16. Or was a job,
after so many years,
still a job?

17. Did they ever wake sobbing
to the sound of sobbing
and find it their own,
and go back to sleep
without ever admitting it,
even to themselves?

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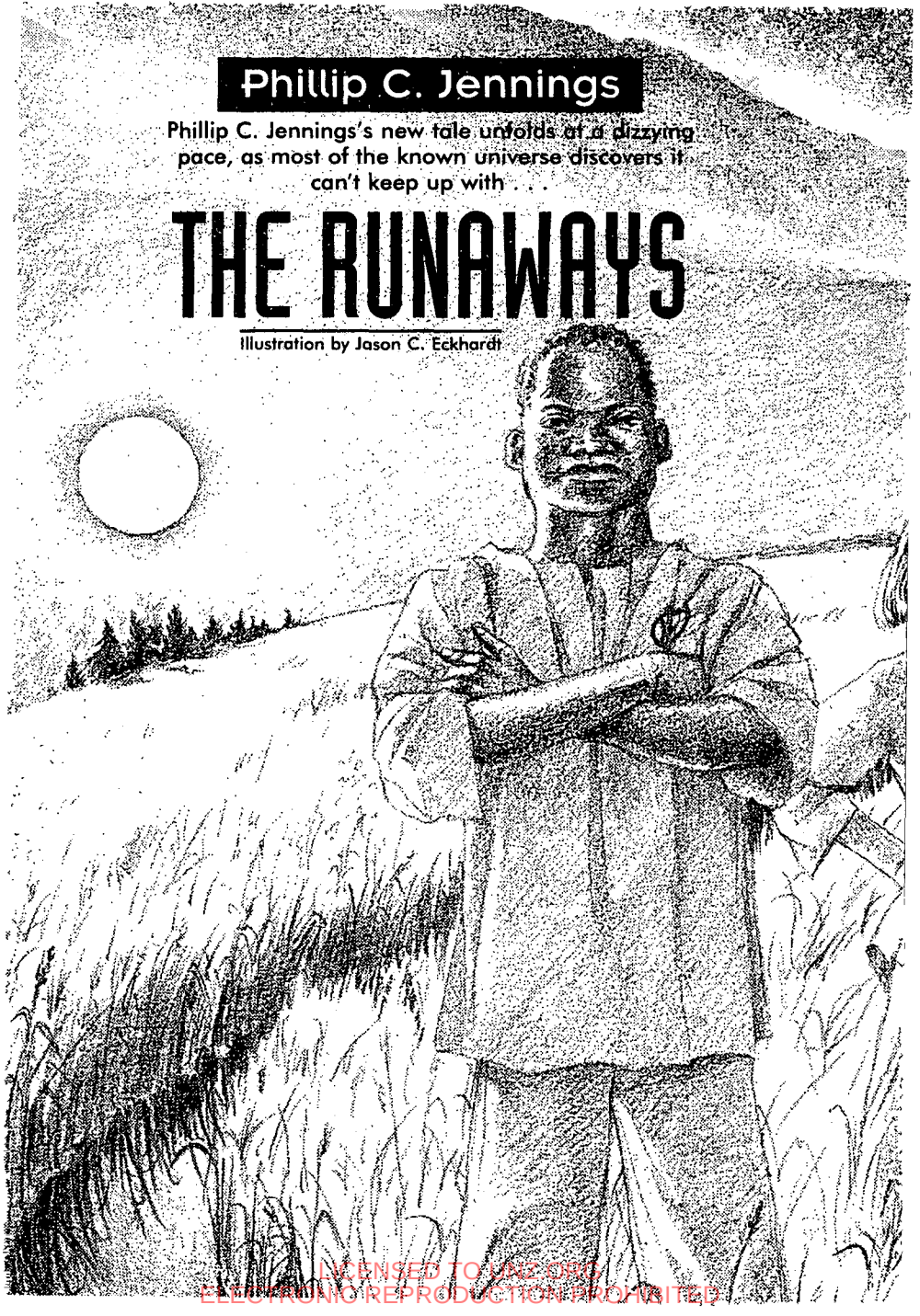
Phillip C. Jennings

Phillip C. Jennings's new tale unfolds at a dizzying pace, as most of the known universe discovers it can't keep up with . . .

THE RUNAWAYS

Illustration by Jason C. Eckhardt



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Shadows stretched across the fields, and the sun plummeted. Sunset. Darkness blanketed Hidalgo.

Peder had never been aware of the clock-calendar glowing on his bedroom wall, not like now. Numbers blinked—09 changed to 10.

10 1021 08. After all those lessons it finally meant something! It was the 10th day of the 1021st trift of year 8. Peder had memorized his numbers and letters, but now they possessed a power. They weren't just sounds in a chant. They represented concepts like the passage of time.

Nurse Carmen smiled at Peder. He saw curiosity in her brown eyes, and hope. "Do you remember coming here? It was late last trift, just after free time."

Peder's voice was rough. He talked seldom and his tongue wasn't honed for speech. "I was bad. I went to the fence. We were running in the fields, and I went to the fence."

"Yes. Never do that. It's too close to the Higgs generator. I had to fetch you."

"Sorry. I don't remember after that." Peder looked around.

Carmen touched his forehead. Her hand was cool. "Doctor Moeller gave you a new medicine. You'll remember everything, not just special times and traumas. You'll have a different life from now on."

It was already different for Peder. Looking at Carmen, he got an erection.

Erections came when—what was her name?—played the rubbing game with Peder, and afterward Doctor Moeller yelled at them, and the nurses got angry and took them apart. But *this* time all Peder did was look at Carmen's front.

Carmen put up her hand. "That's not polite. You shouldn't stare at women like that."

Her voice dropped. "It's going to be hard work. You have to learn *everything*, all at once."

"Sorry. Sorry sorry sorry." Outside the window, the skies were black. Peder made himself turn and look east, waiting for the colors of approaching dawn.

"I hope we did the right thing," Carmen said after a contemplative pause. "In the long run you'll be happier. You'll live a more useful life. Hidalgo might become a colony, not just an institute."

Sunrise. Long shadows. High winds rippled the buckylayer. Day 10 grew bright, and shadows fled the sweeping light. Peder watched them shrink and separate. "Is today a meal day?" he asked.

"Today we'll see how well you learn to dress yourself. First thing tomorrow we'll eat in the commissary," Carmen said.

"Will there be lots of women?" Peder asked miserably. He cast his thoughts into the future, like he'd never done before. Lots of fronts. More erections. "Will they yell at me?"

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Carmen sorted among answers. "Yes," she said finally. "Call it 'yelling' if you want. A better word is 'teaching.' Here are your clothes."

Clothes had always been tricky for Peder. All those sleeves and legs, and what was inside and what was outside, and getting the stickies lined up right. He wanted the fun of having Carmen dress him, but somehow he could tell—not today. Today he did the work of figuring out which was tunic and which was pants, and the inside-outside business didn't seem like a problem at all. He got the stickies on his tunic wrong, but he could tell they were wrong. He fixed them so everything lined up straight.

Peder managed his socks and shoes. He felt proud. It wasn't even sunset. Carmen smiled. "Let's go eat."

"Wait! That's me!" Peder just now saw himself in the mirror. He was like the numbers on the clock-calendar, because there was more meaning in his face than he'd ever noticed before. He fingered his tousled blond hair, and studied his looks: curiosity, a smile, a frown, a blink, tongue out-and-in.

The room grew dark. Day 10 was in decline. Carmen opened the hallway door, and led the way. Peder watched her move. He sang the A-B-C song to make his new erection go away. They reached the commissary.

It was like being thrown in water to learn how to swim. Peder saw meanings everywhere, in how the institute staff looked and helped, putting on special faces to take care of—them? Who were they? Strange and chaotic and deformed, but not Peder. Grunts for words, but not Peder.

Peder went down the line to get a bowl of porridge. Carmen led him to a table. Doctor Moeller was there. So were some others. Peder had played with them, running in the fields, but he didn't know their names. Now they looked at him the same way he looked at them. They were amazed, and fearful.

Doctor Moeller smiled. Perfect white teeth flashed in her dark face. "Trift 1021! The first trift of your new lives! Welcome. Peder, you know Michiko and Hakim and Sanjay here." She put her hand on Sanjay's shoulder. "We're expecting Olga. After breakfast we'll start you in special classes. You've all satisfied the requirements for Cra 103, which is how they're naming medications nowadays, so you should all be having similar experiences. You're in the same boat."

"Like brothers and sisters," Carmen explained.

"Will we keep together?" Sanjay asked.

"Yes. You have a strong need for the familiar. We've made a schedule for you. Things will happen by the clock."

In another part of the room a patient started yelling at the top of his voice: "Bad boy! Bad boy!" Institute staff gathered to soothe him. He was heavy and squat and noisy, and they almost got him quiet. He yelled less frequently, anyhow. They persuaded him to lumber out of the room. Ped-

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er noticed that the people at his table looked like him. The people at another table sat in wheelchairs, and had to be fed.

People came in categories. Some categories were worse than others. Michiko and Peder and the others at *this* table—here came Olga to join them—were a special type. They made Doctor Moeller and Carmen happy. Nobody else in the commissary looked like people on TV, not even the staff, but Peder's group did. They were young and trim, and there wasn't anything physically wrong with them.

Among this select group Peder was tallest, strong and broad across the shoulders. Now he was smart, too. "Cra 103," Peder repeated. He remembered the name. He remembered Sanjay's name, and Michiko's. Hakim was the black kid at the end of the table. Peder smiled. He remembered everything! He could put things together, and figure things out!

After breakfast the group went on a walk. It was dawn again, shadows and ripples and the usual strong wind. The red of the sky faded to orange as the sun climbed. The wind at their backs gave length to their strides. Carmen drove them hard, so that Michiko asked "Why so fast? We're almost running."

"Some of you have too much energy," Carmen explained. "We don't want a bunch of pregnancies."

She'd been dressed in a white nurse's uniform. Now she wore a windbreaker and hiking shoes, and Peder sensed a freshness about her. They passed the eastern grainfields, and climbed Gopo Hill. From this spot they could see much of Hidalgo. The north pole blinked off at a slant to their distant right. Carmen pointed out the fence she called the equator to their far left, but Peder didn't know where to look among the ridges and trees and pylons. They were so high that the ripples gusting across the buckylayer would have been visible, but they were visible anyhow, because it was sunset.

Carmen flicked on her flashlight. They followed her lead, huffing breathlessly around Persian Hole. After this came dawn and day in the wildlands, with the winds whistling through the young trees, and then sunset and night. Dawn came again in the western grainfields, where the Higgs generator was hidden behind its fence, except they were way north of that. The skies brightened and the sun shone on the buildings of the institute. They were far enough north that the circumference of Hidalgo was a mere two-and-a-half day hike.

Was this supposed to wear Peder out? It didn't work. They sat down for reading lessons, his imagination full of the rhythms of buttocks and hips and pumping legs. Slim Michiko! Buxom Olga! Beautiful Carmen! Peder reigned back from a half dozen erections, only by concentrating and reconcentrating on the words in the story cassette Carmen gave him.

It was *Treasure Island*. A movie came with the cassette. After recita-

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tions Peder played it page by page on his readscreen. It made him wish Hidalgo had an ocean like Earth, something bigger than Lake Lago.

Lago was a patch of blue on a piece of sculpture next to the globe of Earth. Hidalgo was longer than round, and cratered, and wrinkled. Carmen took a short break and came back in a white tunic and skirt. She told the group all about their world.

Hidalgo would never be a *big* colony because it was shattered inside. This was bad for mining and other deep work, but Hidalgo had a weird orbit and that made it interesting. Now that dark matter had given it a normal Earth gravity, people didn't have to worry about it coming apart.

"What we have to worry about is collecting too much dark matter—too many asteroids acting like real worlds in the same solar system. We're going to have to use Higgs technology to tug problematical asteroids into huger orbits. Uh, is any of this making sense to you? They told me to push you, but I'm getting way ahead of my own program."

Peder didn't know what she was talking about. He glanced out the classroom window. What he saw amazed him. "*That's* Carmen! Carmen out there, and Carmen in here! Two Carmens!"

The others stood to look. Carmen rapped for attention. "Actually I'm one of three. My parents came in Year 5, because my mother was pregnant with identical triplets. On Earth that's illegal. It's against the population laws. She chose to emigrate rather than abort us."

"Three Carmens!" Olga said.

She sighed. "We call ourselves Carmen. We work in relays, because the patients at the institute never got the idea of triplets. You lumped us together. Using different names got you upset. But now we don't have to make that compromise. Now you can call me Rachel."

Hakim raised his hand. "Who made us be patients at the institute? How did we get here?"

Rachel shook her head. "Some mysteries I'm here to solve for you, and some mysteries you'll solve on your own. Why are you here? For each of you, that's a separate mystery. We can't always tell you the answer. Lots of times Doctor Moeller made promises not to tell. But none of you were born on Hidalgo. I can say *that* much."

Out the window, the shadows cast by young trees began growing long again. Windbreaker-Carmen disappeared around the corner of a building. "Triplets" was a special word for "miracle," but Rachel calmed Peder and her other students by making them count their breaths, and then they had an arithmetic lesson.

Toward the end they took a test. Question 3—"Towerblock A gets a hundred boxes of relief rations a day. If the towerblock gang steals ten, how much does that leave?"

Question 9—"If there are 1440 minutes in an Earth day, and an Earth

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day is one trift long in Hidalgo time, how many minutes are there in a Hidalgo day?"

Question 14—"The mass of Earth is 6,000,000,000,000,000 million metric tons. If the mass of a colony asteroid is 25,000 million metric tons, how much dark matter has to concentrate to make that asteroid the same mass as Earth?"

These questions were beyond the group even as reading exercises. In their distress they talked together, working on each problem as a class. Rachel gave them hints ("Fifty days in a trift, remember?"), and somehow they made do until classtime was over.

It was lunchday. "Do we have to eat in the commissary with those others?" Olga asked, wrinkling her nose.

"Yes." Peder could tell that Olga's question upset their teacher, even though she tried to hide it. As Rachel led them out of the room, she asked: "What about after lunch? Normally you have a four-day nap. Perhaps in the future you'd rather schedule time for exercise."

"Games!" Sanjay suggested. "I'm not tired. I hate naptime."

"Games!" Michiko agreed.

Rachel shook her head. "Not right away. We can't change your schedules on the spur of the moment. We have to make arrangements. We have to find staff people to supervise. Naptime is normally a break for us. Next trift, maybe."

The group ate at their separate table. Despite more protests, they were escorted to their rooms. Peder lay down in darkness. The kid next room over had P-W Syndrome. He whined constantly about being hungry. His noise kept Peder awake. Peder wouldn't have slept anyhow. It was the medicine. Peder didn't know *how* to sleep, with his mind darting among so many ideas.

The clock blinked Day 29. He got up in his rumpled clothes, and watched the sunrise. Someone in the girls' dorm was working her window open. Michiko? Yes!

Peder opened his window. There was a wire-mesh screen. It was screwed into place. He cast around. What could he use? He had an extension lamp on springs. Peder removed one of the springs. It had a C-shaped hook at both ends. The hook was just skinny enough. If Peder worked *really* carefully . . .

He got two screws out, and pushed. There was room to slide through the gap. The sun wasn't yet at zenith. When Peder reached the ground he looked around. Michiko bounded in circles, enjoying her freedom on an empty campus. She saw him and waved. Peder joined her.

Above the drinking fountain where they converged, Hakim pounded on his loosened second-floor screen. "Wait! I'll use my sheets to get down!"

Michiko grabbed Peder's hand, and tugged. She was small and slim. She barely came up to his shoulders, but there was no resisting her ener-

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gy. "We'll see you in the wildlands!" she called triumphantly. "Come on! Come on! Let's run before they see us!"

They ran through evening, and the wind almost gave them wings. When it got dark on Gopo hill, they stopped and took off their clothes, and kissed and rubbed each other. They did more. At dawn they hurried past Persian Hole to the wildland trees where they could hide. They squeezed and did things that hurt. Some of them worked.

Peder and Michiko made sounds of pain and joy. Afterward they lay among the leaves with their hearts pounding. They heard shouts. Olga and Sanjay and Hakim came running down the slopes of Gopo Hill, still far away, with institute staff behind them in their white uniforms. Sun sank and shadows rose. It got dark again, and not safe to run, but both pursued and pursuers ran anyway. "This way!" Michiko shouted.

"Stop!" It was Doctor Moeller. They heard steps in the underbrush.

"It's me. Sanjay."

"Peder."

"I've got stones," Michiko whispered.

"When it gets light," Peder told her.

At dawn they threw rocks at the staff people. Nurses ducked and yelled. One of the Carmens grabbed Olga.

Peder ran and jumped Carmen, using his size to knock her against a tree. Olga got free. The girl was exhausted, and tottered into the brush. Carmen flinched back from Peder's kicks. "You can't do this," she said.

Peder relented. "Leave us alone."

"You'll get hungry. You don't have food."

"No more orders," Michiko said. "No more classes. We're free."

"Think. Think what you're doing!" Doctor Moeller said from a distance. She held a hand to her face. Blood leaked between her fingers. One of the rocks must have hit her.

"We'll think later. We've thought too much. It's hard," Hakim told her. "We want to be free. That's all, just free."

"I'll stay with you," Carmen said. "I'll be your hostage. I'll make sure you get food."

"Hostage? What's that?" Peder asked.

"It means you're free, but I'm coming along." She looked at Michiko. "Where are your clothes?"

Michiko came up and tore Carmen's uniform open. "You have to be like us. Come then. Three boys, three girls. I get first choice after I try out Hakim and Sanjay."

"You don't have to do this, Carmen!" Doctor Moeller shouted.

"Yes I do," Carmen called back. "Things will settle down. We'll reach a compromise."

"They're out of control! We can't track you by relay satellite. The buckylayer is opaque from space."

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"Get yourself to the clinic! I'll be okay. I have faith in these kids. I've watched them my whole career," Carmen said. She tugged at her torn suit, and stumbled away from the tree.

Doctor Moeller's wound gave some urgency to her retreat, and her staff withdrew in a confused clump, with lots of backward glances from Gopo Hill.

Peder remembered the sculpture of Hidalgo. "Where's Lago? Can we walk there?" he asked Carmen. "Are there fences?"

"It's in the southern hemisphere." After so much shouting, Carmen's voice was low and hoarse and resigned. "You won't like it as much as you think. It's winter there. The days at this latitude are twenty-one minutes long, with eight minute nights. Down south it's the other way around."

"Winter?" Hakim asked. He seemed to be hunting an elusive memory. The word made him clutch himself. "Cold winter?"

"No. Hidalgo isn't big enough for temperature variations. It spins too fast."

"We can hide in the dark," Olga said. "They'll be mad. We hurt Doctor Moeller. They'll try to punish us. Let's go there. Let's go south."

The sun set. One last band of light shrank toward the summit of Gopo Hill. It was gone. The darkness grew nearly total. Michiko grabbed Hakim and led him behind some saplings. Olga lay quietly, letting Sanjay stroke her arms. After a time they embraced.

Four of six people clung together. Peder sighed and looked at Carmen. Her black hair was tousled. She seemed new and different.

Carmen spoke against his hopes. "It's rape if you have sex with a woman against her will. That's breaking the law."

"You look like Michiko and Olga," Peder said. "Not much older. Is it the medicine? They took the medicine and now they want sex."

"You can't go in a straight line, Peder. Straight from wanting sex, to doing the deed. You have to think—do I want a baby? If not, what should I do? Maybe the other person has a disease I can catch from having sex."

"Do we have diseases?" Peder asked.

"No."

"Do you want a baby?"

Carmen thought. After a while, she smiled. "Peder, I'm too roughed up. I'll be sore where you kicked me. Let's wait."

"Michiko and Hakim are making sounds. Don't worry," Peder assured her from recent experience. "It doesn't mean she's in trouble."

"Thanks," Carmen said dryly.

Just before dawn, Olga started making sounds, too. Peder got up and walked away, inexplicably distressed, even if Olga was okay. He came back afterward. "Let's go south."

The group hiked through the wildland forest, climbing the crater wall beyond Persian Hole. A fountain sprayed water into the air. The runoff

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became a creek. They drank and settled at the edge of the creek when it got dark. Michiko tugged at Sanjay.

Sanjay shook his head. "No. I'm worn out."

"Hakim?" she asked.

"I'm worn out too." Hakim took a pair of rocks. He began tapping them together, beating out a rhythm. Sanjay joined in, slapping the water with a stick. Olga clapped. Peder beat sticks, and hummed in a loud drone. After a petulant minute Michiko joined in, dancing and pounding the ground.

The syncopation grew complex. Carmen watched. At dawn they were done. "This medicine seems to have taken you beyond what's normal," she said. "That was pretty damned intricate toward the end."

"Beyond? Better than smart? You're already smart," Sanjay said. "If *you* took Cra 103, you'd be *super!*"

"It doesn't always work like you'd expect," Carmen said. She shifted her gaze. "Drugs are designed for certain conditions. They don't work predictably, used in new ways."

"What is it called?" Peder asked. "What are you doing? In your words you're leading us away from a thought you don't want us to think. Always before, you led us *toward* ideas, not away."

"It's called evasion. There's lots of ways to use words," Carmen said. "There's lying. If I said the sky was blue, that would be lying. I won't lie, not to any of you. That's my promise, but it doesn't mean you're ready for all the truth. There's too much. Remember how tired you got of your lessons earlier this trift."

Hakim looked up. "We should be hiking. The sky is orange. *Hazy* orange, anyhow. Let's use the light."

They kept hiking. A couple days after negotiating a difficult cliff, Peder and Olga made arrangements for after sundown. Michiko called in warning. "He's too big. He'll hurt you."

"You want Peder for yourself," Olga responded.

"No, it's Sanjay's turn."

"Sanjay hurt me."

"It won't hurt after a few trifts," Carmen said. "But you see how this can make people feel bad and have arguments? All this changing partners?"

"Yeah. It's just for now," Michiko agreed. "Afterward we'll choose husbands."

"Are you going to create a tribe? A little socio-cultural entity in the jungles of Hidalgo?"

"That sounds good," Peder said cheerfully.

"Tribes feed themselves," Carmen scoffed. She reached into a branch. "You guys don't even know what these things are called, or if they're edible."

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"What are they?" Peder asked.

"They're plums. Go ahead. You need something to eat, and if you hide from the institute, we can't feed you."

The group ate. That night they had two trysts, with Hakim the odd man out. Three days later they reached the Equator.

The fence ran out of sight in both directions. "How do we cross?"

"Don't you wish you'd kept your clothes?" Carmen asked. She seemed irritable. Perhaps it was the humidity. The sky was thick with moisture and loading for rain. "That's barbed wire," Carmen continued. "We make a practice of pasturing the food animals on the winter side of Hidalgo, and growing crops on the summer half."

"There must be a gate, then." Olga said. "Or else we can use *your* clothes."

Michiko agreed. "Take them off and lay them over the wire. Are you different from us? Do you have something to hide?"

Peder intervened before this turned into a fight. "Maybe the fence gate is close by."

Carmen sighed. "No. And I've got nothing to hide except the usual."

"We should have kept our clothes, though," Peder agreed. "We made a mistake."

Carmen stripped and laid her tunic and skirt over the barbed wires. Peder crossed first, and held the wires down for the others. Carmen was last. She rescued her clothes, and rolled them into a bundle. "It's too muggy to put them on. Even the wind doesn't help. It's going to rain in a day or two."

"Is it like a cycle?" Peder asked. "Like day and night?"

"Yes. Very simple. Hidalgo is too small for chaotic weather. The air clouds up and rains every four-point-something trifts. It rains everywhere."

"On Earth it's different?" What Peder said was a question, though he was sure the answer was yes. He pressed on. "Did we all come from Earth?"

"Watch out for cow pies. Sanjay—oh, too late. Yes, all humans came from Earth. I was born on Hidalgo, but I know more about Earth than I do about my own home. There's just so much more to know."

Carmen sighed and continued. "Earth has population laws. For the next few generations, no parents may have more than one child. There are a few exceptions, but only for endangered tribes, not for top people. Not for the rich and powerful. Certainly not in the media democracies.

"Having a smart kid is important, to carry on your name, and genes, and to be your proxy in the future. It's a way of becoming immortal. Have I said enough for you to figure things out? Are you becoming that smart, or should I keep talking?"

Michiko spoke. "If the people on top have kids, and their kids have

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something wrong with them, they're stuck. But if they send their wrong kids to Hidalgo—"

"Excellent!" Carmen said. "If the kids aren't registered, and they're sent to Hidalgo, those top people get a second chance. Mostly, though, the top people do what everyone else does. If they find something wrong with their baby before she's born, they get an abortion. Otherwise, the institute would be much bigger than it is. Your parents are the rare minority who couldn't, or wouldn't, take the abortion route. A minority of a minority, but that doesn't make you unimportant. These are important people, and they pay for your care. The institute couldn't survive without that money."

"We have to understand this better," Peder said. "Tell us about money, and about media democracies, and then explain this again. We need to know about ourselves."

"Money is a way of storing energy for building things and getting work done. It's based on tokens and numbers. If I tell you about money, it'll be just like class. You'll have to learn to add and subtract, and divide and multiply. You'll have to learn lots of things, but you don't have paper or pencils, or books."

"Maybe we'll go back to the institute," Peder conceded. "Not yet, though. Let's see Lake Lago first."

"What's that?" Hakim asked. His voice quavered. He pointed ahead.

Carmen squinted down the path. "Those are llamas. We have herds of llamas and cattle, sheep, antelope, flocks of turkeys, geese—even the geese are dangerous if you get too close. We let them live wild. That means they aren't as respectful of humans as you might like."

"Oh."

"Will there be more herds by Lake Lago?" Michiko asked. Her dark eyes were focused on the monster shapes blocking the downslope.

"That's where they go to drink. It'll be crowded," Carmen said.

Peder took resolve. He ran at the llamas, yelling and waving his arms. The animals moved away at a moderate pace. One of them turned, guarding their retreat.

The group caught up to Peder. "They don't want to fight," he said, breathing hard. "Lake Lago will be big enough for all of us."

"It's getting dark." Olga sounded afraid.

"We'll rest by those trees. Then go to the lake."

"And then back across the fence," Olga suggested.

"I'm getting hungry," Sanjay said. "Plums aren't enough. Let's go home to the institute."

Carmen smiled. "It's not easy being free. You guys are learning fast."

The six sheltered under a copse of trees whose lower branches were eaten away, leaving plenty of headroom. The night was darker than in the northern hemisphere, dark and long, but Michiko and Olga were ner-

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vous and lacked much relish for sex. Hakim worked on Olga, and then gave up. Only then did she change her mind. "Come behind here," she whispered. The usual rhythms ensued until dawn, when Olga suddenly shrieked.

Carmen lunged to her feet and circled the trees. "Damn," she swore. "I'd almost nodded off. Shoo. Shoo. Go away."

A few meters away a half-dozen cows stared at the lovers with soft brown eyes. Carmen flapped at them with her tunic. Ignoring her objections, the cows ambled after the whole group as they walked downslope and toward the lake. The haze thickened to fog. Not much was visible.

Carmen spoke softly, as if she didn't want to be overheard by bovine ears. "I wonder about the bull."

"How smart would cows be if they took Cra 103?" Peder asked. "They seem curious. They want to know things, but maybe they can't. Their brains don't hold ideas very well."

"Do any of you feel sleepy?" Carmen asked. She seemed uninterested in the intellectual capacity of cows. She yawned and stretched. "Am I the only one?"

"What day is it?" Peder asked. "Bedtime is Day 42."

"It's well past that," Carmen said. "Past 50. This is a new trift."

"We can't sleep. Everything's exciting," Michiko said. "Cows are even bigger than llamas. Look, here are some rocks."

The group armed themselves. The rocks brought back memories. "You're the one who conked Doctor Moeller," Hakim told Michiko. "If we go back to the institute, they won't be so mad at the rest of us. Not like with you. We shouldn't share your punishment. It wouldn't be fair."

"Are you *that* hungry? You'd turn me in? You'd say you were sorry just for food?" Michiko asked. "What a shit! Olga can have you. I choose Sanjay."

"Sanjay's hungry too," Hakim said. "I heard him say so."

The group reached a grassy bank. Slick mud lay beyond, trodden by hooves, lavished with manure, and puddled with water. They squished another two meters and reached the true waterline. The wind didn't reach down to this low place, and Lake Lago was mirror-still. Cottony seeds floated on the surface. The fog was very dense.

Carmen explained the buddy system. "Hold hands with your partner. Keep the others in sight. You guys can't swim, so don't go in above your waists."

She held her hand out to Peder, and they splashed for a time. She relented and let him give her a kiss. He embraced her and pressed into her breasts. The rains began, cleansing the lower atmosphere of fog. Lago seemed to grow wider. Its mirror surface broke into rain-lashed chaos.

The brightening of the skies was deceptive and brief. The sun set. Suddenly everything was dark. "Back to shore!" Carmen ordered.

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The six splashed in. Feeling blindly, they found each other. The cattle mooed and shuffled and snorted. Clearly they were close, and there were lots of them. The rains grew heavier. "This is a nightmare," Carmen muttered.

"We'll go back. We've had enough freedom," Peder whispered.

"Do you understand then? You're big in body, but you're children until you know a lot more about Hidalgo."

"This is Year 8, right?" Peder asked. "Eight summers, eight winters. Each winter the animals switch from south to north."

"That's right."

"So each winter does the institute switch from north to south?" Peder went on.

"Yes," Carmen said. "There's a winter campus. The layout is almost a duplicate of the summer campus."

"Classrooms there? Paper and pencils?" Peder bent closer. "Are you disappointed I had this thought? It means we might not have to go back."

"I don't know if we'll survive these next minutes. Something big is snorting out in the dark."

Peder straightened and cupped his hands around his mouth. "YAAAHHH!"

Instant panic. Shadows of black on black turned and climbed each other, trying to get away. Sanjay and Hakim joined the shouting. Michiko threw rocks and managed a high ululation that was incredibly irritating, even to humans. Carmen grabbed her right and left neighbors, Peder and Olga. "Let's step back into the water. Those beasts don't know where they're going."

The herd thundered off, crashing and bellowing. The rain ended suddenly. The darkness lasted longer, and then the sun rose to the north in a deep red sky. The lake reflected the buckylayer like a mirror, bending over the horizon. Its south shores were lost beneath a distant ridge.

The group left Lago and its trampled perimeters. Carmen identified a buggy trail of two parallel ruts, now overgrown. They took another four days to reach the institute's southern campus. The buildings lay on a windy plateau that shelved from the side of a mountain.

Carmen told them that the mountain was so high it pushed through the buckylayer and into vacuum. "Spaceships can land at the South Pole without entering Hidalgo's atmosphere."

Carmen went to the utility building to power up the campus and open the water valves. When they entered the commissary, Peder let her make a radio call. One of her sisters spoke from the other end. Rachel talked of altered schedules and Doctor Moeller's medical condition. "Guess where we've left food for you."

"Where we dropped our clothes?" Olga called over Carmen's shoulder.

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"You got it," the voice answered. "We'll fuel up the buggy and bring that stuff over. We'll use the road, but it'll take ten or twenty days. Meanwhile, maybe somebody left emergency supplies in the cupboards. Stuff that keeps."

Carmen signed off. The group wandered behind the buffet tables and into the kitchen. Sugar. Popping corn. Spices. Chocolate syrup. A bottle of Krinos brand grape leaves. Catnip.

"The cats went feral last year," Carmen said. She yawned uncontrollably. "We haven't seen them since. Let's make some popcorn before I fall over.

After popcorn Carmen tottered off to sleep in the bed in the nurse's office. Peder and the others went separate ways, to check if all the buildings were open, and if the classrooms had teaching supplies.

A few days later they assembled back in the commissary. "I'm not sleepy at all," Michiko announced.

"I laid down and tried to sleep, but it didn't work," Olga added.

Peder rubbed his chin in thought. He felt the beginnings of a beard. "I think it's the medicine. It's something the medicine did to us, but they didn't expect it. They didn't expect us to run loose. They think it's bad for us to have sex, but they didn't do the right things to stop us. They didn't expect us to want sex as much as we do."

"If they invented Cra 103, they know all about it," Olga said.

"I don't think so." Peder held up his hands against her protest. "Not if we're the first people to take it. Somebody has to be the very first. That's us."

"What if this medicine does *other* things we don't expect?" Sanjay asked.

Olga went over to rub Hakim's shoulders. "We can watch ourselves, and be careful."

Michiko shook her head. "What if the medicine wears off, and we go back to like we were before?" She answered herself, stress rising in her voice. "We have to let them boss us, if that's what they want. Anything, just to get more medicine."

"When the buggy comes, or when Carmen wakes up. We'll tell them then," Peder said. "We'll tell them we're sorry. We don't want to be free anymore."

"We could use the radio like Carmen did," Hakim suggested. "We could talk to them right now. I saw how she did it."

They trooped to the radio room, and Hakim got the radio working. "South station calling north. South station calling north."

Nothing happened. They fiddled with the dial and found static. At other setplaces, the radio throbbed out noise. It sounded like pulsing engines.

Olga reached a tentative finger, and pushed AUTOSEEK. The radio

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reverted to static, but the static didn't obscure a voice. Someone with an odd accent talked about economic outlooks, evidence in a murder case, and the anniversary of an important NASPAC education loan bill. There was something about a Lunar lesbian spokeswoman seeking entry to UNETAO, and something about the Hidalgo question. More mudslides were expected following torrential rains in Nepal.

The voice spoke on.

"What's the Hidalgo question?" Michiko wondered.

"What's all this noise?" Carmen stumbled into the room.

"We're sorry," Peder said. "We were trying—"

"To listen to the news?" Carmen seemed surprised. "How would you know there's such a thing as news?"

"There's a Hidalgo question," Michiko persisted. "They were talking about it, but they didn't say much."

"No." Carmen sank into a chair. "No, they wouldn't. One arrested soccer hero gets ten times the airplay. I'm surprised they mentioned us at all."

"We were trying to reach the institute," Hakim said. "We wanted to apologize for running off and throwing stones and hurting Doctor Moeller."

"We're going to be good now," Michiko said.

Carmen looked at her. "Something's happened."

"We don't want to become stupid again," Peder explained. "Maybe we need more medicine, or else that will happen."

"And in your simple honesty you want to make a deal." Carmen smiled. "I feel *lots* better. Even a short nap makes a difference. I hope I wasn't too grumpy toward the end of our trek."

"None of us can sleep," Olga said. "I tried. We just can't."

"It's the Cra 103," Carmen agreed. "It's a side effect. Your brain cells are fuzzing out with new connections, and it's too stimulating. Maybe after they stop growing—do you understand? The growth is permanent. You'll plateau and stay intelligent."

The group sighed in simultaneous relief.

"It might be best for you to stay here, though. To keep you separate from the others."

"Can't those other kids take Cra 103 and get smart?" Peder asked.

Carmen reached and tousled his hair. "You're generous! You even want smart cows! Are you happy then? Is it good to be smart?"

"Yes!" "Yes!" "It's very good!"

"What if I took this medicine?" Carmen asked. "Or maybe Doctor Moeller?"

"You said it might not work on people like you," Peder answered.

"We don't know. We *think* it'll work. It might be me who gets chosen. I'm one of triplets. It's like having two spares. And Doctor Moeller is re-

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covering from her injury. You heard the radio. She's had stitches, and she'll need dental repair."

"I'm sorry about the rock," Michiko said. Her eyes grew wet. "It's my fault."

Carmen patted her arm. "If I take the medicine, maybe I'll get wild like you were at first. That makes me nervous. You guys used your new brains to get into a trap. Stampeding cattle could have killed you. *That* makes me nervous twice over."

"Why take medicine?" Peder asked. "You're smart already."

Carmen sighed. "Hidalgo has problems. Half the settled asteroids use Higgs generators to gather dark matter. Having more gravity helps them collect air under their buckylayers, but they don't like too much gravity. The colonists have adapted to light conditions. By Earth standards, the people on Ceres and Vesta and Iris are very weak. One gee would kill them."

She leaned back in her chair. "We're different. Until our troubles began, Earth leaders felt okay about sending kids here, because we have Earth normal gravity. To achieve that gravity, we became dark matter hogs. We started something that's hard to stop. Dark matter keeps falling in of its own accord. It can't all concentrate inside Hidalgo. It's layering outward in an invisible sphere that keeps growing and growing. It's already ten thousand kilometers across. We're starting to create anomalies in the orbits of everyone else in the inner system."

"Anomalies? What's that?" Peder asked.

"Bad kinds of changes." Carmen shook her head. "Here's the deal. We've got to go into exile. We've got to pull Hidalgo far into the outer system. But then we won't get more customers for the institute. We'll be too far away. It takes a long time to fly from Earth to the *innermost* asteroids. Then too, when we're far from the sun, even our bucky-black albedo won't keep Hidalgo warm and Earthlike. We'll depend on solar mirrors in inner system orbits, and they can be sabotaged."

Carmen sat forward and sighed heavily. "We've *got* to move, but moving will cripple our independence and put us out of business. We can't figure a way out of our trap. Maybe the best thing is to give all our kids Cra 103, declare you cured, send you to other asteroids, and switch off our Higgs generator. That's it, unless I think of something when I'm smarter than I am right now."

"We could go to Earth," Peder suggested.

"Immigration is forbidden. Immigration by kids whose parents went ahead and had seconds—you'd be put to sleep. It's a gentle injection and a gentle euphemism. The fact is you'd be killed. Being on Earth makes you criminals."

"We'd be super strong on other asteroids," Michiko said.

Carmen agreed. "They'll put you in quarantine until you adapt. It's in

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the interests of public safety not to have bodybreakers on the loose. In ultra-low gravity one of two things will happen. You'll waste down and become Ectos, just skin and bones. Or else you'll put on masses of fat and become Endos. Either way you'll live long unhealthy lives, with lots of medical intervention. Women don't menstruate when they're too thin or too fat. Sex can be difficult. Endo-Endo sex is often impossible. During your quarantine you'll have your ovaries removed to save eggs for artificial reproduction. Have I said enough?"

"These are our only choices?"

Peder spoke up. "What's wrong with closing the institute? When everybody's smart we won't need it anymore. We could move Hidalgo, and make it a colony, and just—well, *farm* or something."

"Solar mirrors cost money," Carmen said. "What can our colony produce to earn money to position a few dozen mirrors, so we don't freeze?"

Peder looked at Carmen. "This problem is new to us, but it's old to you. You and Doctor Moeller and all the others on the staff, you had this same talk. You wanted to find a way to make money. That's why we're here!"

"What are you talking about?" Hakim demanded.

Peder explained. "Now and again some medicine comes from Earth that the doctors don't know about. They know how it's supposed to work, but they need to try it on people. *So which people?* Us! They test it on us, and you watch to see what happens."

"We don't test every medicine that comes along," Carmen said, looking from face to face. "We're careful. Just medicines that promise good things for you. Now you're smart, so that phase is over. Otherwise you're right. You've been test subjects. That's been your job for the last five hundred trifts. We got paid so much per head. Does this upset you?"

"We've got to move to other asteroids and become Ectos or Endos. Or else we test medicines for money. Or freeze. Or go to Earth where they want to kill us," Olga summarized. "You should take Cra 103. Get smart enough to give us more choices."

"It only seems fair," Carmen agreed.

"One thing," Peder persisted. "Us being upset? Why did you sound worried about that?"

"You can guess," Carmen said. "Certainly *Earth's* upset. You have important parents. We get money from them. We need more. We've needed more ever since business slacked off. We tried to be sneaky about the drug testing program, but some of those parents found out. From Earth's view there are two Hidalgo problems. One; we're getting too massive. Two; we're being bad and victimizing innocent kids. Maybe we're willing to do worse things to get money. It's called survival, but on Earth it's called blackmail."

"You aren't bad," Hakim said.

"I'm glad you think so. Obviously we're not perfect. There are ethicists

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on Earth calling for a rescue fleet to get you. The radio talks about musterings and activated units. We're actually supposed to be worried!" She shook her head. "They're too damn cheap. For a fraction of the cost of a fleet, they could subsidize us and we wouldn't have a problem. That's all we ask for."

"Do we have guns?" Peder asked. "If they send a fleet we can fight them, like on those TV shows. We're strong and we're smart."

Carmen reached to pat his butt. "Better a lover than a fighter. No, our armory is small. Cattle prods, kitchen knives—laughable. Anyhow, we'd be outnumbered." She stood up. "Come along, Peder. All this nude pessimism is making me want to have a baby. Let's go back to the nurse's office."

Behind the locked door of the nurse's office, Carmen and Peder balanced on a narrow hospital-style bed. Eight minutes of daylight winked by, and twenty-one minutes of night. Another day came and went. Peder spent himself and rolled off to recover his energies. Despite the popcorn, his stomach growled with hunger.

Outside the window, a buggy puttered up to the commissary door. Carmen sat up and looked for her clothes. "Wash and go collect the others," she told Peder.

The group helped unload the buggy. Back in the kitchen, Rachel provided an on-the-spot lesson in making hot porridge. "There's been another final ultimatum from Earth," she told Carmen.

"I've told the kids everything," Carmen answered. "I can't believe they understand it all, but that's okay. I don't either. They make the right noises."

"Are they ready for schooling? Will they rebel again?"

"Yes. No. We want to learn," Peder told Rachel. "We want to help Hidalgo."

"Amazing," Rachel said. "Quite a change from throwing rocks."

"We're sorry," Michiko said. "It's my fault." Unexpectedly she started to cry.

"Could we have clothes again?" Olga asked.

"In less than a trift they've gone from preschool to late teens, in terms of the socialization of violence," Carmen went on. She patted Michiko. "They've volunteered to fight any Earth rescue force. I think they'd try, if we let them. Maybe even if we don't."

"We could take Cra 103 twice, and get *really* smart," Sanjay said. "Then we'd invent weapons like Doctor Zul-tar of *Sky Force 9* on TV."

"Uh-huh," Rachel said. "It'll be interesting seeing you try to enjoy your favorite videos, now that your intelligence has gone up so much." She turned. "Olga, I'll fetch clothes next trip." She turned back to Sanjay. "No more medicine. Too many neural connections and your brain might get wired solid. Signals might jump every direction at once."

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"If it's dangerous for us, it's dangerous for Carmen."

Rachel looked to Carmen. "You told them about that too? This crazy ambition of yours? Jesus!"

To Peder, watching smart people argue was an education. Carmen answered: "I didn't say I was going to take a dose, not unless it seems safe. But I'm not scared off by your 'solid-brain' metaphor. We've got a CD library of every kind of neural problem known to humankind. Where do you see these solid brains? You've made them up."

"You call it invention," Rachel said. "I call it extrapolation. In any case you promised to wait a hundred trifts. That's minimum time for observing these kids."

"Is Earth going to give us a hundred trifts?" Carmen asked.

"Who knows? Their diplomats talk so carefully we can't be sure of anything. All the fire they've breathed hasn't burnt us yet." Rachel looked at the group and lowered her voice. "Watch their eyes. They're taking all this in. It's such a change."

"Our parents might send spaceship-soldiers to rescue us," Peder said. "You don't want us to fight them, but we could talk to Earth on the radio. We could tell them you've made us smart. They should be happy about us. We'll tell them you're not bad people."

Carmen pondered. "This actually might be a good idea. We could put you on TV, so they'd know you were speaking your genuine thoughts. Rachel, what do you think?"

"I think they haven't plateaued yet," Rachel said. She shivered. "It's frightening, almost. Two trifts ago Peder couldn't reliably dress himself."

"Frightening?" Peder asked. "Oh, I see. Like with dark matter."

"How? Explain what you mean," Carmen said.

"You used this Higgs thing to start collecting dark matter inside Hidalgo, and now the dark matter collects itself."

"A runaway process," Rachel agreed. "You're saying you've got runaway intelligence."

"Isn't that what you're afraid of?"

"I'm afraid it may go so far that—yes. Dark matter could ruin the inner system. Intelligence could ruin you as a human being, if we can't teach you fast enough to keep up."

"We'll have classes right after porridge," Carmen said. "While Rachel goes north for clothes."

In reading class Hakim complained about the absurdities of English orthography. Sanjay agreed. "Even the *language* has bad logic. There's ten times too many rules, and none of them work completely."

Carmen gave them Esperanto cassettes. "Try this, just for fun. It was a great idea, but it never caught on."

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They page-flipped through the first exercises. "This language is *bona*," Hakim said. "Why didn't people like it?"

"Imagine you're flying an airplane. You've got a radio headset on, but the plane is noisy, and you're bumping through a storm. Someone down in the control tower is talking to you, trying to guide you. You can't hear her very well. She's using a verb: *rapidas*. Or is it *rapidis*? Or *rapidos*? Present, past and future tenses. In English it's much more distinct. Am hurrying, hurried, will hurry. All the illogicalities of English make it easy to sort out what might have been said. In real life there's static in all our headsets. When you're used to English you escape that static."

"But if we were *used* to Esperanto, and if we fixed the endings, couldn't we keep the beautiful logic?"

Carmen sighed. "Since we're so interested in logic, let's switch to math. After a day or two let's introduce some algebra."

Lunchday followed math. After lunch the six paired off in three directions.

Rachel returned to the south campus in her buggy, and found the commissary empty. She went to the girls' dorm. Michiko and Sanjay responded to her shouts. Peder watched through the window blinds of a boys' dorm bedroom. "She's upset. She's telling them not to have sex anymore," he reported to Carmen. "She's telling them about babies."

"Babies are a lot of trouble," Carmen admitted. "Come along. Apparently my sister wants everybody to assemble out there."

The group assembled. Rachel handed out clothes. "Let's check the herb garden," she said. "We put up netting to keep the geese and turkeys away, and the bigger animals can't climb over the fence. I want to teach you some practical food-lore. See, knowledge goes in all directions. Each of these herbs has a place in human history. Every plant was first discovered somewhere, or bred, and then carried off to new places. Now even to new worlds!"

Rachel's herb lesson introduced the group to places like Egypt, Greece and Persia, Central Asia, the Celebes Islands and Mexico. They went inside and she handed out picture-story cassettes that talked about ice-age people and the first civilizations. Peder was amazed at how big Earth was, and how much history it had.

Rachel agreed. "People devote lifetimes to studying just one little island, or a few generations of some medieval family."

Carmen bid goodbye to Rachel and took over the classroom. She opened a closet full of musical instruments. "Let's see how fast you can learn notation," she said.

Peder glanced outside. Rachel emerged from the commissary carrying a hatchet. She strode toward a corner of the campus, boxing in a pair of retreating turkeys.

"Blow." Carmen handed Peder a worn plastic trumpet. He let out a

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blat. He experimented with the finger-holes, developing a range of blats. Outside, he saw Rachel twirling a headless turkey by its feet, spraying rings of blood. The turkey kept flapping and pulled a leg free of her grip, even though it was dead. Rachel gave up and let it go, and it tumbled in the long campus grass. By the end of this short day, it was still making convulsive movements.

Peder played his plastic horn through the night. Musical notation came easily. The group's next lesson was anatomy. Then astronomy. Smelling of soap, Rachel came in and took over. "Thank God," Carmen said. "I feel like they're wringing me dry. Soon we'll have to hand them over to the CD library and stand aside."

"You'll find work to do in the commissary," Rachel said. "I've killed a turkey for next trift."

Carmen left. Rachel taught sex education, and then sketched out the history of life on Earth; evolution, disaster, more evolution, more disasters. The accompanying movies were spectacular. Continents floating around! Dinosaurs! Comets!

"Seven million years ago, some plants learned to extract a third again as much energy from sunlight as the others. We call these 'carbon-4' plants," Rachel said. "They spread over the Earth. Their hunger sucked carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere and reduced the greenhouse effect. After a while Earth started having ice ages. The ice was hard on the old kind of forest vegetation, but carbon-4 grasses adapted, so for them this was a good disaster. Birds and mammals adapted too. Carbon-4 plants had more food value. Soon they were cropped so much that their advantages over the old forests were almost nullified. We humans are a product of this new environment of grass and ice ages."

Peder latched onto the phrase "a good disaster." He raised his hand. "You say there are changes that hurt most things, and can't be turned around, but a long time later we learn they were good."

Rachel nodded. "You're correct in the abstract. Earth is going through disaster right now. Many varieties of life are becoming extinct. The loss is in front of our eyes. The eventual gain is something we can only guess at. This disaster is caused by too many people, so we're responsible, but we don't dare say we're doing a good thing. We're breaking down a system of life just to make more room for our favorite carbon-4 plants. That's called hunger. For a while human hunger was a runaway monster. We're still not sure Earth's population laws can stop the destruction."

Peder caught Michiko's eye. She nodded. She'd noticed too. Runaway processes led to disasters, but *some* disasters could be good. They'd get a chance to talk after supper, about the good of too much dark matter, and the good of too much intelligence. Peder raised his hand again. "We need to learn how to use the library."

Long after supper, and after Rachel and Carmen went to bed, the

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group used their sleeping shift to study history, molecular biology and physics. Next trift the odors of roasting turkey drifted out of the commissary building. Around Day 25 their appetites drew Peder, Michiko, Olga, Sanjay, and Hakim from the library.

They were waiting in line with their silverware and trays when soldiers from Earth pushed in through the lunchroom door. Carmen and Rachel submitted to arrest and were brought from the kitchen to stand with the others. "Don't attract attention," Carmen whispered to Peder. "They think you're mentally retarded. Maybe that's useful."

Peder nodded. The soldiers handed out pressure suits the same blue-and-silver colors as the ones they wore, minus unit insignia, badges of rank and weapon packs. Peder didn't have to feign stupidity after putting on the helmet. As for the rest of the suit, he let Carmen and Rachel dress him as they dressed the others. The two nurses whispered. "They're going to de-activate the Higgs generator. Our atmosphere will expand. We're not like the other asteroids. Our buckylayer isn't heavy enough to keep the air dense. Without suits we'd die."

"Hidalgo is being shut down," Peder said.

"Yes. We'll be taken to a light-gravity asteroid. Some of us will be put on trial."

After dressing their patients and themselves, the nurses were led to a separate room and locked in. Peder and the others sat at a table. A couple of soldiers eased into place nearby, apparently stationed to keep an eye on them. They could be expected to consider themselves more protectors than guards.

Peder bent close to Michiko. "Their spaceship is on top of the south pole mountain. Hidden above the buckylayer."

"Maybe." She passed him a lunchroom fork. "You're strongest."

Peder hid it under his glove. "All those poor cows."

"If we don't do anything, we won't have our good disaster." Michiko said.

The sun rose to the north outside, visible in the lunchroom window. Moments later the window cracked. Air keened out. The fabric of their pressure suits ballooned. The sky darkened from orange through brown to black around the sun, and filled with stars. Most of the stars were crystals of snow. The snow was slow to fall.

The soldiers stared at these sights with the rest of the group. In exultant terror Peder stepped toward the two men. Already Hidalgo's gravity was less than normal, and he bumped into his targets. He used the clumsy collision to good purpose. Air hissed from the first soldier's suit. The man doubled over and convulsed around the floor like Rachel's dead turkey. Peder stabbed the second, digging tine-holes into the fabric of his suit.

Olga ran to the locked door, and freed Carmen and Rachel. Peder and Michiko donned the dead soldiers' weapons packs. They waved guns.

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"You're going to play prisoners," Michiko shrilled. "We're leading you up the mountain."

"What?" In thin air nobody could hear well. Michiko acted out the message, gesturing again with her weapon. For all Carmen and Rachel might know, they *were* prisoners. Prisoners of a gang of uneducated lunatic geniuses.

The seven exited the commissary and bounded uphill through snow-dusted grass that crumbled to the touch. Beyond the campus, the climb grew steep. More and more of Hidalgo grew visible. In one starlit night they reached altitudes beyond the peak of Gopo Hill. An oily line marked where the buckylayer had formed a ceiling above the sky for so many years. The rocks showed color below and gray sterility above—but now the buckylayer was kilometers higher and thinner, straining to hold Hidalgo's depressurized atmosphere.

With each step, the group leapt to new heights. Below to the right, they saw Lake Lago boiling into thin air, the base of a massive spouting plume of snow. On the far side of the equator, figures flashed into the sky like atoms of silver as they tried to head south to the ship. The patients of the institute were being "rescued," but how could they cope with such unfamiliar conditions? By now their weight must be less than one-tenth normal, but that didn't mean severely retarded kids in wheelchairs could be taught to walk.

The forces of Earth had three places to go: north campus, south campus, and the Higgs generator. The north campus was now the focus of everyone's attention. Everyone except the guard stationed at the foot of the spaceship entry ramp.

The group bounded into view. The guard pointed his gun, and raised his left hand to tap his helmet. At a loss, Peder tapped his helmet in answer. Michiko fired. The guard flew back violently. The group ran for the ramp, all but two. Carmen and Rachel twisted free of Sanjay's grip, and backed away.

Sanjay was last in through the ramp. Peder nodded, and they climbed the central shaft. One of the pilots fired down. Michiko returned fire at almost the same instant, and the man tumbled over the rail.

Peder leapt in urgent hope of success and hurried toward a closing bulkhead. He thrust his blooded fork into the crack. On the far side, someone struggled to secure the door. In moments that person was outnumbered four to one. The bulkhead swung open. Michiko fired again.

Her victim was a woman. Hakim and Olga pulled her body out of the way. "Go down and shut the ramp," Peder shouted. "We've got to learn how to fly this thing."

This far toward the south pole, Hidalgo's day was a brief gleam of light, followed by twenty-eight minutes of darkness. It took Peder an entire extra-long night to figure out the sequence of events culminating in liftoff.

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When one bank of controls turned out to be nothing more than a "master light control panel," he decided the designers of Earth had gone out of their way to make piloting a spaceship daunting and complex.

Restraining his temper, he set every complexity aside. In the end it was simple. You told Computer Display 1 what you wanted. Someone else told Computer Display 2 the same thing. That freed the control stick.

Take-off! The spaceship shot up. It cut through the attenuated bucky-layer, a film of soot on top of the atmosphere, composed of giant hollow molecules. The film healed shut behind them, holding in a small world's air.

"Now all we have to learn to do is steer. Let's get the ship pressurized first," Peder said. "I want to take off this stupid helmet."

"Hurry. I'm hungry," Michiko said.

They pressurized, stripped off their pressure suits, and ate from ship's stores, regretting Rachel's lost turkey.

Without a Higgs generator to concentrate it, Hidalgo's dark matter had expanded to a sphere forty thousand kilometers in diameter. Their ship swam through invisible ghost-stuff. Peder knew there was no way to orbit the asteroid very long *inside* this sphere, not so the spaceship wouldn't be dragged toward the center, but the opposing factor was that the sphere began dissipating around the edges. Left to its own, un-Higged dark matter didn't pack tightly.

"Well, we can afford to fall for a while," Peder decided. He canceled thrust and weathered the vertigo of zero gravity. "Now let's learn to use the radio."

"I've got it figured out," said Hakim.

"That's what you said the last time," Michiko answered.

Hakim flicked a switch. A voice filled the control room. "—to *Queen Marguerite*. Rendezvous South to *Queen Marguerite*. Please answer. Over."

"Are you talking to us?" Hakim asked. "We've got the spaceship. Is that its name? *Queen Marguerite?*"

"Who the hell are you?" came the answer. "What's going on? Why the radio blackout? We're at Rendezvous South and waiting. We've got hungry kids here."

"Take them back to the institute," Hakim said. "Turn on the Higgs generator. There's a lot of dead cows you can butcher for food." After a pause he said "Over."

"That's not on the program. Over."

Hakim grinned at Peder. "We control the program. We've got your spaceship. You've got no choice." He remembering a line from *Sky Force 9*. "We're your worst nightmare. Do what we say. The longer you wait, the deader Hidalgo gets, and it's going to take Earth a hundred trifts to send another ship."

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"Trifts? That's a local term. Are you locals?"

Hakim made a gesture of disgust and switched off the radio. "I wonder if we've got a CD library on this ship," he said. "We need to polish our educations."

"And all by ourselves. We can't talk to Carmen and Rachel," Michiko said. "They'll tell us to stop being bad, and we won't know. Is that really what they think, or are they being forced?"

"We're being bad," Peder said. "We killed five people. We're runaways. Like carbon-4 plants, we have to be bad first so we can be good later. But you're right. Let's stay off the radio. To have Carmen tell us she's against us—that would hurt too much."

Half a trift later, Hidalgo's buckylayer collapsed toward its former diameter, and grew darker as it thickened. "Things can start getting back to normal," Peder said.

"They're going to use a Higgs generator parked out past Jupiter to collect enough dark mass to tug Hidalgo into the outer system," Olga said. "We've guessed that they've already started, and Hidalgo's natural orbit will take it to the tugging place. Let's go there. Anywhere else in the solar system, we'll be arrested."

"They could lose us," Peder said. "I'm not kidding. If we keep radio silence, and change course by increments, how will Earth keep track of us? Besides, they won't expect us to go to the supermass."

"We have supplies to feed the whole population of Hidalgo for a hundred trifts," Sanjay said. "Fuel, too. And exercise equipment to keep soldiers strong in zero gravity."

"We're set then. Let's go."

Peder's group spent the next hundred fifty trifts in radio silence, studying the reference works in the *Queen Marguerite*'s CD library, especially the sections relevant to the planet Jupiter and orbital mechanics. After an initial period of intellectual triumph they grew bored, and invented new sex games. They returned to their computer displays to study oddball subjects like law, sewage treatment, chamber music, and religious heresies of the European Reformation. They skipped workouts and drifted in Endo-and-Ecto directions, then rebuilt their muscles in frenzies of exercise.

They played computer games and wrote novels. The games were easier to score, and provoked fewer arguments. They developed a "perfected" version of Esperanto. Hakim and Sanjay went on to create a perfected version of the perfected version. Olga and Peder coined new slang words and idioms. Michiko and Sanjay talked to each other entirely in rhyme.

Sanjay wrote a program to generate names for 237,677 prospective worlds, each not quite a thousandth the size of Earth, and therefore considerably bigger than the biggest asteroid. Of course, Jupiter was exces-

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sively gassy, and lots of hydrogen would just plain dissipate when they started pulling it apart.

Olga shook her head. "They're too sonorous, your names. They sound too much alike." She wrote her own program, biased in the direction of wicked consonant clusters. The group agreed to alternate Sanjay-names with Olga-names.

"It all depends, of course, on whether we can get Earth to build 237,677 Higgs generators and send them out," Peder said.

Michiko smiled. "We're going to make an awful mess of the solar system, if all Jupiter's mass isn't confined into an orbital ring. Only dark matter can maintain a permanent necklace of pearls sharing the same path. Only Higgs generators can confine dark matter."

"We'll be old before this project is over," Peder said. "We'll sacrifice our health. We may never set foot on real ground again." He listened to an inner voice and spoke again. "Well, that's some punishment for the bad things we've done."

The Higgs supermass loomed ahead, a patch of empty space to normal eyes, with a robot station in the middle. The *Queen Marguerite* dropped through, tangenting past the station, and out the other side. It slowed, stopped, and fell in reverse, less energetically. With each pendulum swing, Peder braked. After another trift they came to a stop. "Okay, we're here. This is the biggest thing ever contrived by human hands, and we're going to use it to make something even bigger."

Michiko ran out cables to take the robot station in tow. Hakim was designated to do the talking. He composed himself in front of his microphone and began his broadcast. At the speed of light, hours had to pass before the people of Earth learned that the solar system was no longer theirs. ●

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NEXT ISSUE

MARCH LEAD STORY

Inventive and pyrotechnic British writer **Ian McDonald** takes us on a poignant voyage of discovery through a troubled future Ireland where you can't be certain of anything, even who you are, or who you *were*, in his haunting tale of the consequences of going "After Kerry."

BIG-NAME WRITERS, AND THE BEST OF THE NEW

Hugo-winner **Ben Bova** joins forces with **Rick Wilber** to take us out to the Ball Game, and give us ringside seats for a baseball game unlike *any* ever played before, as we witness the epic confrontation of "The Babe, the Iron Horse, and Mr. McGillicuddy"; new writer **Kage Baker** makes a wry and sprightly *Asimov's* debut, taking us back to Old California for a wild romp through history where one of the major ingredients in the thickening plot is an unusual "Noble Mold"; acclaimed British writer **Brian Stableford,** whose novella "Mortimer Gray's *History of Death*" was on this year's final Hugo ballot, takes us "Inside-Out" to some strange alternate realities that may turn out to be linked in some surprising—and dangerous—ways; **William Sanders** (who is a popular mystery novelist under a different name) makes a highly entertaining *Asimov's* debut in which he unravels one of the Mysteries of the Ages by settling who *really* wrote Shakespeare's plays (*Shakespeare,* of course, dummy—what did you think?), and also details how, under other circumstances, some of them might have come out just a bit *differently,* in the madcap and inventive saga of "The Undiscovered"; Australian writer **Stephen Dedman** returns to give us a "Tour de Force" with a surprising sting in its tail; new writer **Andy Duncan** sends us to Hell on a very slow train, making his *Asimov's* debut with a scary yet evocative tour of the place called "Beluthahatchie"; and **S.N. Dyer** returns to show us that, all those Psychic Hot Lines to the contrary, sometimes it's best *not* to know what's going to happen in the future, as she demonstrates in the hilarious story of "The Nostalgianauts."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column gives us a few intriguing "Glimpses of the Future"; plus **Peter Heck** with "On Books," and an array of cartoons, poems, letters, and other features.

Look for our March issue on sale on your newsstands on January 21, 1997, or subscribe today and be sure to miss none of the great stories we have coming up for you.

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ON BOOKS

Peter Heck

FIRESTAR

by Michael F. Flynn
Tor, $27.95 (hc)

Michael Flynn's *Firestar* begins with a prologue set on August 10, 1972, in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Mariesa van Huyten, a wealthy young woman, is celebrating her last free summer before college. Mariesa's boyfriend is about to make his move when she looks up in the sky and sees a large meteor flash by (astronomy buffs will already have recognized this as an actual historical event). This incident becomes the central fact of Mariesa's life, convincing her that a full-scale space program is essential for removing some part of Earth's population from danger of cosmic annihilation. (This conviction becomes an obsession with her; it is an obsession I happen to share, but I am a mere SF reviewer, not the heiress to uncounted millions.) As she comes into control of the family business, she dedicates the resources of the financial empire to making her vision a reality.

The process is necessarily multipronged. She needs not just a few hot pilots, but materials, technology, trained workers, administrators, and freedom from interference, both from government and from private individuals who oppose her program—some of them competitors, some of them anti-technology crusaders. *Firestar* follows several of these branches. We see the recruitment of test pilots, and their assignment to an offshore launching facility—nominally run by Brazil. We see the takeover of a New Jersey public school by Mentor, a Van Huyten-owned corporation that has the hidden agenda of training those who will create the new space age, a broad category that includes mechanics and soldiers as well as future scientists and space cadets. Even one poet—a profoundly alienated but brilliant young woman who begins her career under the name "Styx"—is part of Mariesa's master plan.

But of course there are complications—this is the damned human race we're talking about, not some computer simulation—and therein lies all the fun of the novel. Mariesa meets Barry Fast, an English teacher at the school taken over by Mentor, and is taken by his lack of pretension and his concern for the students. Their relationship gradually turns romantic. Mariesa's mother Harriet, a very unpleasant person, staunchly opposes the relationship—threatening to use her proxies to undercut the space program if Mariesa continues to see Fast. The test pilots

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(whose personalities cover a range from sheer cowboy to near-robot) play their own game of one-upmanship, with the ultimate prize being the first *real* flight of the new bird; in pursuit of that goal, anything goes.

As for the Mentor students, they're just kids—very ordinary, very real kids, despite the opportunity in front of them. Some of them follow the program blindly, some with an awareness (that doesn't preclude acceptance) of being manipulated; some rebel when they learn what's been done to them; a few end up self-destructing despite the best efforts of Mentor. It's almost heartbreaking (though inevitable in retrospect) when Styx turns against Mariesa—her poetry is so good that one is reluctant to believe that a mere science fiction writer created it all.

The first-order goal of Mariesa's plan is the development of a reusable SSTO vehicle; by the end of the book, she's achieved that and more. There are now regular suborbital intercontinental flights, and her vehicle has proved itself to be a workhorse at delivering cargo to the space station. But she has not gotten any of this without paying a heavy price. Her marriage appears at last to have fallen apart, thanks to Barry's inability to break off his affair with a married colleague from school. Styx (who seems in many ways the best and brightest of all the Mentor students) has allied herself with an environmental activist who sees Mariesa as the enemy. And while Mariesa's corporate rivals appear to have been squelched for the time being, they undoubtedly have many more resources to draw upon before the game is over. And it's really just begun; this book stands alone very effectively, and delivers a strong climax (although the last few chapters have to scramble a bit to get there), but it is only the first of a series following the development of this intriguing future history. It will be very interesting to see where Flynn goes with his sequels.

"I laughed, I cried. . . ." It's the oldest cliché in the book, and this time, for this reviewer, it's true. I wanted to cheer at the end, and would have, if I'd thought the characters could have heard me. If you like large-scale hard SF with a big cast of characters and complex ideas, *Firestar* may be just your meat. Bravo, Mr. Flynn!

WHITEOUT
by Sage Walker
Tor, $23.95 (hc)

Sage Walker's first novel is also near-future in setting, and another example of the SF/thriller hybrid that many authors are trying their hands at these days. In contrast to Flynn's can-do vision of the future, her future is built on a pessimistic extrapolation of current trends: environmental degradation, overpopulation, growth of mega-corporations to challenge established governments. These are the original tropes of cyberpunk, but they have ripened into a language that can be employed in fiction with a

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much broader vision than the cyberpunk label suggests.

A prologue gives us a glimpse of some anonymous act of nautical sabotage involving someone named Tanaka, during foul weather in the Drake Passage at the southern tip of the Americas. A distant explosion barely seen through the night and storm sounds the keynote for much of what follows: terror and betrayal. Walker then jumps to New Mexico, where snow is falling around an old adobe house. There we meet Signy, one of the members of Edges—a consultant group, specializing in the use of virtual reality to change public opinion. The members of Edges think of each other more as family than as business partners, though their links to one another at any given time are as likely to be on-line as in person.

Edges is in financial trouble, largely because Pilar, a dancer/performance artist who occupies the group's Seattle home, has blown its cash reserves on an unsuccessful concert tour; when Signy chews her out for it, Pilar cuts the connection and goes off somewhere to sulk. So when Paul, the group's New Hampshire-based research specialist/legal expert calls with news that Edges has been offered a contract, Signy is ready to leap on it without asking questions. Only the reader hears alarm bells at the name of the prospective client: Tanaka.

Tanaka wants Edges to help it to negotiate changes in an international treaty governing commercial exploitation of Antarctic resources. Tanaka is no fly-by-night; its business, harvesting Antarctic krill to feed the burgeoning Japanese population, has a record of slow but steady growth for many years. And it wants the treaty altered to limit the harvest, which it fears is in danger of depletion from overfishing. This sort of project is a bit beyond Edges's normal problem-solving expertise; but on closer examination, it seems doable—perhaps even a little on the easy side.

Edges goes to work, and we begin to see its members in greater depth. Janine lives in Seattle with Pilar; the two of them handle most of Edges's creative output, and Janine makes most of the in-person appearances. Signy is a neurobiologist, founder of her own lab; Paul is old New England money, with a Harvard Law degree. Jared shares the New Mexico house with Signy; his background is in medicine. Dispatched as an observer (and fill-in shipboard doctor) to one of the Tanaka Antarctic fleet, he arrives just as the ship recovers a drowned body. We learn for the first time that Tanaka has lost a ship, three days before—and that the company is making little effort to search for it. Nor does the ID discovered on the drowned man match any records Edges can locate—though readers may recognize his name from an earlier scene.

From here, Walker effectively keeps the suspense up by jump-cutting between various viewpoints. This is an old technique, but one that seems especially effective deal-

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ing with a group entity (if not quite yet a group mind) like Edges. Jared appears on the verge of discovering something, then abruptly vanishes—apparently lost overboard in the deadly Antarctic waters. In Lisbon, where the international treaty conference is meeting, Tanaka makes a sudden change in its negotiating position just as Janine is geared up to apply Edges's carefully prepared strategy.

With the help of an outlaw hacker named Whiteline (in part because his price for a job includes enough cocaine to get him through it), Edges begins to discover that the opposition to their plans—and the person most likely responsible for Jared's disappearance—is one of the potential heirs to the Tanaka empire.

The novel covers a world-spanning geographical range in easy leaps, and its use of the Web to transfer information across the continents is smooth—and convincing. (We're well past the point where the original cyberpunk writers had to simply *imagine* what the Web would be like; Gibson had never owned a computer when he "invented" cyberspace, while most of today's writers are regulars on one or more of the online services.) Walker's use of multiple viewpoints gives us a look at a world not just from street-level, but from all sorts of angles—we get inside a working scientist's head, a dancer's, a doctor's, a media consultant's. This produces a richly detailed world—not necessarily a world one would want to visit, but one that the reader is likely to remember. The Antarctic scenes, where the most physical parts of the thriller plot take place, are particularly well-portrayed. And Walker has a nice knack for keeping the suspense simmering by letting the reader see just enough more than the characters to worry about what happens next.

A strong debut novel for Walker, showing a nice command of setting and of suspense plotting.

ATTILA'S TREASURE

by Stephan Grundy
Bantam Spectra, $13.95 (tp)

This big (550 pp.) historical fantasy is a follow-up to Grundy's 1995 *Rhinegold,* a retelling of the legend of Sigifrith (Grundy's variation of Siegfried, as the Germanic hero is most widely known). The new book is not in any normal sense a sequel; instead, Grundy takes a backward leap to the early life of Hagan, a Burgundian prince who appears in Sigifrith's story as brother-in-law and as one of the main agents of Sigifrith's death. So the events of this novel are parallel to those of *Rhinegold,* and explore a different part of the world of the early fifth century, when domination of Europe began to fall out of the hands of Rome and into those of the barbarian tribes arriving from the east.

Hagan is the youngest son of the Burgundian royal family, sent from their stronghold at Wurms to the camp of Attila the Hun, a powerful eastern rival to whom Hagan will become a foster son—and a

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hostage for the Burgundians' good behavior. At the same time, Hagan's family sees his tenure with the Huns as a chance to renew their ties with their old ways; the Huns still live the warlike, nomadic life that the Burgundians have begun to forget as they live among peoples softened by the influence of Rome and Christianity. They hope that Hagan's military apprenticeship with the Huns will make him an effective commander of Burgundian troops upon his return. At the same time, the aging Sinwist, or high priest, of the Burgundians sees Hagan as one of the few young men who has the potential to carry on the pagan beliefs.

A grim, humorless fourteen-year-old, Hagan is a firm upholder of the pagan worship of Wodans (Odin) in the face of inexorably spreading Christianity. So when he is assigned to share a house with Waldhari, a hostage from a Frankish Christian family, sparks fly between the two young men at first. But they soon find themselves allied against the other youths of the camp, who suspect Hagan of witchcraft—a skill his mother is known to practice—and accuse him of using "women's ways" to defeat them in combat training. (That hint carries considerable thematic weight as the plot progresses.) The other boys' suspicion of Hagan increases as the Huns' shaman pays special attention to Hagan, which the young warrior returns with all due respect for the "eldest grandfather."

Grundy's anthropological background gives his portraits of the society and religion of the Huns an unusual vividness; with not only Hagan, but two or three other characters from contrasting cultures as observers, we get a fine sense of what life in a Hunnish camp might have been like. In comparison to the grim, intensely focused Hagan, most of the Huns seem like good company indeed—especially the Hunnish women, whose earthy good humor, physical strength, and common sense make them far more attractive to Hagan (and probably to many readers) than any of the "western" women in the story.

This is particularly clear upon the arrival of Hildegund, a timid young Gothic Christian hostage whom Attila announces his intention to make his bride—and with whom Waldhari falls desperately in love. Therein lie all the seeds of the destruction that follows. The conflict between religions brings increasing tension to the plot, as Hagan begins to spend as much time as an apprentice to the shaman as he does in combat training; the Huns, who worship warlike gods, have no objection to such a dual calling, especially since Hagan quickly grows into one of the strongest warriors in the camp. But Hildegund will not bend in her devotion to her church, and when (upon her request) Attila allows a priest into the camp, her resistance is hardened—and her closeness to Waldhari is made even more obvious.

The plot builds slowly (perhaps

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too slowly in spots) to several crises. Hagan's conflicting loyalties—to Attila, to Waldhari (with whom he has become a blood brother), to Wodans, to the shaman, to his own family—place him at last in an untenable position, and the final catastrophe turns him into the grim, terribly scarred man who is capable, in *Rhinegold*, of bringing about the death of Sigifrith. And yet, by that point, Hagan is as surely a hero as any character in fiction. Grundy's portrayal of his hero's life and character, turning the villain of one story into the tragic hero of another, is an impressive feat of character-building. Despite the slowish beginning with a dour young protagonist who seems to resist every opportunity to make himself likable, the book's last half moves to its bloody catharsis with powerful momentum. Historical fantasy doesn't get much better than this.

ASSASSIN'S APPRENTICE & ROYAL ASSASSIN

by Robin Hobb

Bantam Spectra, each $12.95 (tp)

Here's a very enjoyable fantasy series—the first two books, at least—on the "young misfit coming of age theme." Hobb is reportedly an established writer who has taken on a pseudonym on editorial request—certainly this reads like the work of a seasoned professional, rather than of a newcomer. The setting is the Six Duchies, ruled for generations by the Farseer dynasty. Originally raiders from the Outislands, they found it convenient to settle the more temperate mainland. The first King, Taker, established the line, and the tradition of allegorical names in the royal family.

We learn this in a brief historical memoir written by the series's first-person narrator, a royal bastard—son of Prince Chivalry, the heir apparent—whose mother was a commoner in a backwater town. After his father's sudden abdication, he is discovered and brought to the royal castle at Buckkeep. There, he is at first left to the care of Burrich, the royal master of hounds, hawks, and horses. Formally addressed as "Fitz," but known in the kitchens as "Newboy," he lives above the stables and runs with the street urchins in the nearby town. Caught pilfering sausages by Burrich, Fitz accidentally reveals an ability to bond with animals and "share minds" with them—the so-called "Wit," a magical talent treated by his society as an abomination. Burrich sternly admonishes him never again to use the Wit. Yet the apparently similar talent, the "Skill," of sharing minds with human beings, is one of the most valuable in the land, at one time carefully cultivated by the royal family.

Finally noticed by King Shrewd, Fitz moves to a room within the palace, where he begins to learn the intricate relationships of power and influence at work. He still visits Burrich, but his days are now taken up with lessons and drills; it has been decided that he will be

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made a useful part of the royal establishment. Exactly what that part will be is revealed one night, when he awakes to find a strange man in his bedroom, and a previously hidden stairway leading to a secret apartment within the keep. The newcomer is Chade, the royal assassin, and he has been assigned to instruct Fitz in the fine art of diplomatic murder.

From this point on, Fitz's life takes on some of the flavor of Kipling's *Kim*, as we follow the bright young man immersed in learning all the lore of duplicity and disguise. Fitz is believed to have inherited the diplomatic skills for which his father was famous, and Chade makes it clear that, properly construed, the assassin's art consists as much in knowing when (and when not) to kill as in knowing how. Meanwhile, Fitz is getting practical daily lessons in court intrigue, as he watches his two uncles, princes Verity and Regal, and their retainers, play out the intricate game of waiting for King Shrewd to die. They are all jockeying to be in the best possible position thereafter.

And from this point the series builds. Fitz goes on missions, first with Chade, then on his own, with broad instructions as to the desired results and the freedom to bring those results about according to his best judgment—whether or not he has to kill anyone. A rash of Outisland pirate raids, which leave the victims alive, but soulless and feral, sets off an unprecedented crisis. The only defense against the raiders appears to be a corps of trained users of the Skill; Fitz undertakes the training, at the hands of a sadistic martinet, with disastrous results. Another near-disaster follows when he is sent to help seal a foreign alliance, and learns that the man he has been ordered to kill may be his nation's best ally. Then, with the long-anticipated death of King Shrewd, the political situation falls apart. Increasingly, Fitz is in the middle of these developments—and, more than once, he finds himself the target of assassination attempts.

At the same time, Fitz continues to be drawn to the use of the Wit. Burrich continues to warn him against it, but finally Fitz bonds—with great reluctance, at first—with an animal that represents his true alter ego: a wolf cub. This relationship becomes the central focus of the second novel, as the two realize how they complement one another. At last Fitz has an ally who is a true equal, to whom human pretensions and the intrigues of the court mean nothing. At the same time, as he has grown past adolescence, he has found himself falling in love, yet both his birth and his work keep coming between him and the women to whom he becomes attached.

A complex growing-up story, with plenty of strong, unclichéd supporting characters, and an interestingly drawn society. I'll be waiting for the third installment of this excellent fantasy series. ●

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

In the holiday lull, our annual look at the new year. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 13107B Autumn Wood Way, Fairfax VA 22033. The hot line is (703) 449-1276. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons) leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre, with a musical keyboard. — Erwin S. Strauss

DECEMBER 1996

27-29—**Stellar Occasion.** For info, write: **3352 Broadway Blvd. #470, Garland TX 20167.** Or phone: **(214) 278-6850** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Dallas TX (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Harvey Hotel. Guests will include: Walter (Chekov) Koenig. A Star Trek convention from the A-Kon folks.

JANUARY 1997

3-5—**EveCon. (301) 292-5231.** Holiday Inn Francis Scott Key Mall, Frederick MD. " '97's 1st & friendliest con."

3-5—**NecroCon. (614) 882-9812.** Harley Hotel, Columbus OH. Low-key relax-a-con.

10-12—**Arisia, 1 Kendall Sq. #322, Cambridge MA 02139.** Park Plaza, Boston MA. R. A. Salvatore, Bob Eggleton.

17-19—**ChattaCon, Box 23908, Chattanooga TN 37422. (404) 578-8461.** Turtledove, Friesner, Kidd, Grant, Elliott.

17-20—**AnaConism, Box 21766, Denver CO 80221. (303) 426-1847.** Sheraton Denver West, Lakewood CO.

17-20—**ConFurence, Box 1958, Garden Grove CA 92642. (714) 530-4993.** Buena Park (CA) Hotel. Furry fandom.

24-26—**ConFusion, Box 8284, Ann Arbor MI 48107. (313) 487-8743.** Van Dyke Park Suite, Warren MI. S. Delany.

24-27—**SwanCon, Box 318, Nedlands WA 6009, Australia.** Tradewinds Hotel, Fremantle Australia. H. Waldrop.

25-27—**MedTrek, 6 Bellevue Rd., Faulconbridge NSW 2776, Australia. (047) 515-740.** Pride, Morley, Stathopoulos.

31-Feb. 2—**HurriCon, 328 N. Eglin Pkwy., Ft. Walton Beach FL 32547. (904) 863-8810.** Holiday Inn. G. Effinger.

31-Feb. 2—**VidCon, Box 2076, Riverview FL 33569. (813) 677-6347.** Tampa FL. For multi-media zine fans.

31-Feb. 2—**UK Filk Con, 3 W. Shrubbery, Redland BS6 6SZ, UK.** Rozel Hotel, Weston s. Mare. SF folksinging.

FEBRUARY 1997

7-9—**VisionCon, Box 1415, Springfield MO 65801. (417) 886-7219.** Clarion Hotel. Comics, anime and gaming.

14-16—**Boskone, Box 809, Framingham MA 01701. (617) 625-2311.** Sheraton Tara. John M. Ford, Ron Walotsky.

14-16—**Attitude, 14 Prittlewell Sq., 1st floor, Southend-on-Sea SS1 1DW, UK.** Abbey Hotel, Great Malvern.

14-16—**Gallifrey, Box 3021, N. Hollywood CA 91609. (818) 752-8378.** Airtel, Van Nuys CA. John Levene. Dr. Who.

14-16—**RadCon, 2527 W. Kennewick Av. #162, Pasco WA 99336. (509) 943-0713.** Red Lion, Pasco WA. F. M. Busby.

20—**Organia, B. Cesar Mota, Rua Cabralia 30 #501, Belo Horizonte MG 30240-080, Brazil. (031) 225-2836.** Star Trek.

21-23—**JohnCon, HopSFA, OSA, 122 Merryman Hall, JHU, Baltimore MD 21218. (410) 235-3659.** Johns Hopkins Univ.

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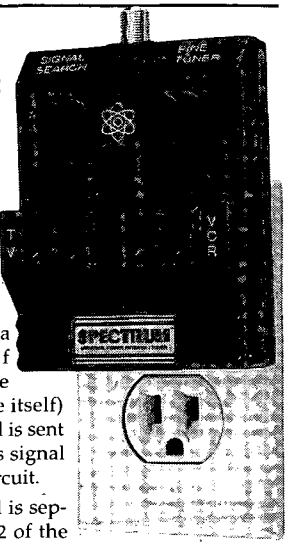
TECHNOLOGY UPDATE

Fifteen years of microelectronic research makes conventional antennas a thing of the past!

This little box uses your home's electrical wiring to give non-subscribers, cable subscribers and satellite users better television reception!



Fifteen years of microelectronics research has resulted in a remarkable device, the Spectrum Universal Antenna/Tuner, that makes conventional antennas obsolete.

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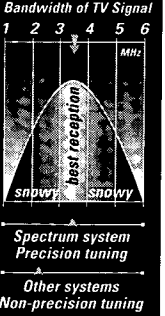

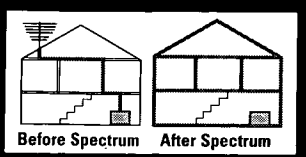

How does Spectrum use electrical wiring as an antenna? Believe it or not, Spectrum simply "activates" the giant antenna that already exists in your home. Essentially, it uses all of the wiring throughout your home's walls and ceilings to make an antenna as large as your house for unbelievably clear reception of local broadcasting.

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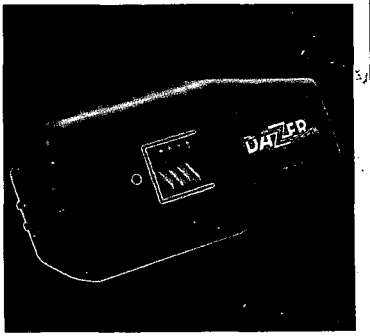
The Ultrasonic Deterrent - The Dazer™



The Dazer is a handheld dog deterrent. Utilizing safe, humane, ultrasound technology the Dazer is a must for joggers, bicyclists, the postman and especially kids and seniors. The Dazer works by producing a discomforting, but not harmful, high frequency sound audible only to dogs. Unlike Mace and other chemical deterrents there is no harm to the animal. It's compact, lightweight and features a belt clip for easy carrying. Shipped with a 9 volt battery. **#2DE202**

$34.98 ($5.95 S&H)

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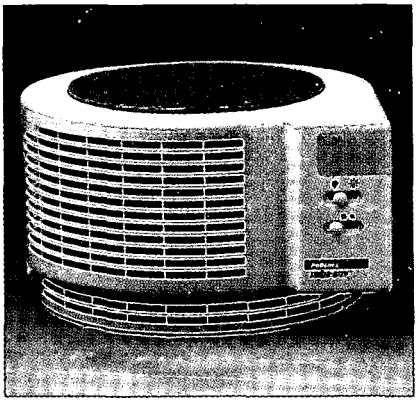

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